Nehad Selaiha

# THE EGYPTIAN THEATRE

## New Directions

*For all the independent troupes and artists who have made the Free Theatre Movement a reality*

# PREFACE

The articles included in this book were selected from hundreds written over the past 10 years, between 1992 and 2002, and published in ***Al-Ahram Weekly***.

The ones in the first part attempt to tell the story of the inception, progress and many setbacks of The Independent Theatre Movement which was born in 1990, during the Gulf War, as an alternative to mainstream theatre, whether state-run or commercial. The movement is still struggling to survive against great odds.

The second part of the book records some of the experiments, successes and failures of the groups the movement spawned and tries to shed light on many of the brave young women and men behind them.

The history of those groups remains largely undocumented, which partly explains the purpose of this book. But if by the end of it the reader can share some of my enthusiasm, respect and admirnation for the work they do and the principles they defend and sympathize with the obstacles they face, the book will have truly fulfilled its purpose and I shall consider myself richly rewarded.

**Nehad Selaiha**
**Jan. 2003**

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Last August, when the state-sponsored Experimental Theatre Festival was abruptly cancelled on account of the Gulf crisis, a group of young theatre people met under the rallying cry : war or no war, the show must go on ! The leader and agitator was journalist and actress Minha al-Batrawi who felt very angry at the high-handedness and overweening arbitrariness of the decision.· 'They have no right. They consulted nobody', she bawled on the phone when she rang up to invite me to a protest and consultation meeting at the Acting Professions Union down town. I knew how she felt; for some artists the festival is the only chance of public exposure and they work very hard for it all year, paying dearly in terms of cash and time, even though they know they will only get a place on the outer margins.

Initially, all Minha had hoped for was to create a pressure group to persuade the Ministry of Culture to allow a *national* theatre festival to go ahead if an international one proved unfeasible or politically embarrassing. It would cost nothing, she thought; an elected voluntary committee, from amongst the artists themselves, could manage the festival and do all the work; there would be no administrative, technical or publicity costs, and no travel expenses or fat hotel bills. All the government had to do was hand over a couple of theatres and their facilities for the duration of the festival.

* September 1990.

At the first meeting, however, on 23rd August, things began to snowball. What Minha hadn't bargained for was the existence of a strong and militant, if politically and artistically immature, underground theatre movement : young and ardent self-supporting offshoots of the university and state regional theatres, manned by talented former students and amateurs, and lacking any legal status. They came in droves, flaunting fanciful names and clamouring for recognition and the right to participate. The word had certainly gone round : the Jugglers, the Loonies, the Visionaries, the Rebels, the Luminaries, the Sudanese Drummers, the Protesters and the Apollonians, not to mention the more sober Warsha, Movement, Encounter and Theatre Club groups – they were all there, like jinnis late loosed from their bottles !

"Where have they all sprung from ?" exclaimed the distracted Minha. I must admit that I too was a little taken aback though I had known of the existence of some such troupes and had seen a few of their performance at some foreign cultural centres and at the GEBO's Book Fair the previous january. But I hadn't counted on there being so many ! And such weird names !

We were no fools. Some of these flamboyant appellations, we suspected, must have been thought up on the spur of the moment; nonetheless, their overwhelming physical presence was a solid fact. There was no denying that a substantial body of theatrical talent, however amorphous and submerged, did exist outside the stuffy official establishments and needed an outlet and some form of care and nurturing. The theatrical organisation in Egypt, however, in its present condition, is not qualified to give such care. Indeed, if these incipient fringe troupes are to realise their potential and bloom into a vigorous

alternative theatre, on the western model, the state will have to revise its whole policy vis-a-vis the arts and its anachronistic machinery.

It is amazing that a government which advocates a policy of general liberalization and seems all too anxious to relinquish its direct control of the economy and encourage a free market and the privatization of the public sector should prove so recalcitrant when it comes to surrendering its control of the performing arts and the mass media. In the case of theatre, everybody, including the managers of the five state companies and the official regional troupes, agree that what is badly needed are more state subsidies and less state control. At a recent panel discussion at the National Cultural Centre, Karam Mutaweh himself, the head of the theatre sector at the Ministry of Culture, admitted that bureaucracy had overrun the theatre organization, eating up four-fifths of its five million budget and putting the proverbial spanner in the works; it had become so stultified, so antiquated, he went on to say, that the only way to deal with it was dismantle it.

Karam Mutaweh seemed to be echoing what the angry young men and women of the fringe had vociferously argued for, three months ago, at that historic meeting on 23rd August. The crucial moment was deciding the name of the proposed 'non-governmental' festival : from practical considerations we slithered fast into the 'politics of theatre' and the 'philosophy' of the festival; the thorny issue of state control became the subject of a heated debate. In passionate outbursts, grievances, old and new, and bitter resentment poured out; feelings ran high, and what started as a modest peaceful project threatened to turn into open rebellion. One is tempted to go on, and give you the full inside story of that serendipitous fluke of a festival. However, this is neither the time

nor place, and Minha would probably do it better than me. So, to cut a long story short, the fringe troupes won a brief victory and had their fleeting hour of glory : they christened the festival The Free Theatre Festival; drew up a manifesto and published it in the first number of the festival's bulletin; they got some attention from the media and, above all, *ten days at the Opera House* (albeit confined to the Small Hall and the Open Air Theatre only). Still quite an achievement, they being the beggars !

Compromises were inevitable; and some of them were quite absurd. The most ridiculous of all was putting the festival under the aegis of the Acting Professions Union to escape legal prosecution and spite the Ministry of Culture into the bargain. Ironically, in ordinary circumstances, this self-same Union would be the first to pursue, harass and prosecute the members of these troupes for performing without a licence, and would, furthermore, deny them one if applied for on the grounds that they lack official qualifications and official sponsorship ! At that moment, however (it was approaching election time), it suited the purposes of the Union to pit itself against the Ministry, to pose as the guardian of the arts and the champion of the theatre's underdogs and outcasts – or, more appropriately in this case, outlaws. Such contradictions lent the staunch anti-government defiant stand of the festival something of a Quixotic air. Those frustrated young men and women, with no money, formal training or legal protection, wanted desperately and rather pathetically to believe for one brief moment that they had finally defeated the Gorgons and were in control – the Gorgons being the bureaucrats, the Censor and the emergency laws. In fact, they had only managed to stick their tongues out at them !

It is a sad truth that in a country like ours, with no tradition of private patronage of the arts, no tax concessions to private artistic enterprises, and so many crippling laws and statutory constraints, the theatre, in any serious sense, fringe or otherwise, cannot survive without some form of enlightened state support and cooperation. The Free Theatre Festival may have been, artistically, a flash in the pan; but as a protest, a political gesture, it had far-reaching implications. Not only has it revealed the existence of an Egyptian Fringe, but also diagnosed the ailments of the current Egyptian theatre scene and tentatively suggested the cure.

Freedom, and more freedom and yet more freedom is required. And Money too, and knowledge : access to professional training courses. It is scandalous that in a country with a population of fifty million or more the only training venues for theatre artists are one theatre institute in Cairo with a very limited capacity (60 places a year), an even smaller theatre section at the university of Alexandria, and the odd workshop at the National Cultural Centre ! More drama schools, workshops and performing areas are badly needed, together with a freer subsidies system on the model of the British Arts Council and *less censorship*. The alternative is a depleted, ever shrinking Egyptian theatre. More grimly, these frustrated young artists who are fighting on the side of the enlightenment may soon tire or despair and join the forces of darkness. Rather than budding artists, we could end up with a lot of bigots and fanatics on our hands.

# Acting Against Great Odds*

For the second year running, the starved and struggling Egyptian fringe actors have made it. Against great odds, they have taken arms against a sea of troubles and though by opposing they are still a long way from having ended them, they have at least launched their second festival this week and invaded the stronghold of the National Upstairs and overrun the Avant-garde theatre.

The story of those magnificent men and women, with their 'flying' dreams, was told on this page over a year ago in a lead story entitled 'A Place Under the Sun'. Their fortunes have not changed since; life is still very arduous and cash in very short supply. The Acting Professions Union, which gave their festival legal protection both this year and last, still denies them membership; the Ministry of Culture still refuses to give them even token financial support and the Arab Artists' Union which last year contributed the measly sum of LE 250 towards the cost of the festival chose this year to shut its ears to their urgent pleas. A place to perform was all they were given by the government.

But they remain undaunted. Over a period of months, they met twice weekly at the headquarters of the *Theatre Magazine* to plan their second encounter, as they prefer to call it, reaching deep into their pockets, almost to the last penny, and doing everything themselves. Division of labour in their case is an unheard-of luxury.

Learning from last year's experience, they took great care to improve the general artistic standard of their shows and kept well away

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* 26 December 1991.

from the Opera with its haughty airs and tough security men. After a lot of shilly-shallying, they were allowed to use the small hall of the National and the big hall of the Avant-garde theatres for one week from 6 to 9 o'clock only. this meant more work since two different performances had to be accommodated daily at each theatre in that short space of time; it also meant more money, which came out of the artists' pockets, to pacify the grumbling resident theatre workers and technicians. A very tight schedule was prepared and so far it has run smoothly with only minor alterations.

Most of last year's troupes, like Encounter, The Light Troupe, The Protestors and The Visionaries, were there with new, ambitious productions; there were also some newcomers with names as interesting as Shrapnel, The Scream, The Mirrors, Psychodrama and The Misaharati. There were fifteen in all, giving us some of the most exciting theatrical fare we have had this year.

The festival chose the plays of ths late Yussef Idris as its central theme this year in honour of his distinguished contribution to the stage and Egyptian culture in general. Encounter launched the event with a lively and fast-moving production of his *Striped Ones.* Director Khalid Galal who gave us last year Pinter's *Mountain Language* and followed it up with the *Ghosts' Carnival*, which travelled to Avignon, displayed the same vibrancy, technical efficiency and imaginative bravado. It is a production that would have delighted Idris, as said his daughter Nisma, the festival's guest of honour.

Of Idris's other plays, The Visionaries gave us *The Third Sex* and a production of his famous *Underlings* (El-Farafeer) was scheduled but withdrew at the last minute when three members of the troupe were

suddenly called up for military service. A panorama of some of Idris's plays was also on offer and the Protesters used his three famous articles on theatre as the basis of their production, *An Arab Show*, merging them with *The Underlings* in an exciting collage with disco music, dance and puppets.

Idris's outstanding contribution to the art of the short story was also celebrated in the form of adaptations. The Rebels produced an adequate rendering of his daring *A Table from the Sky* and The Light troupe built their thrilling production, *Demi-Rebels*, on six short stories. That latter production, in particular, won general critical acclaim and was repeated more than once; it also won itself an offer of a two-week run at the National Upstairs after the festival, a consummation devoutly to be wished !

Apart from the cluster of productions which took Idris as their theme, there were other interesting varieties. Of these Shrapnel's *The Blind*, based on a French text, was at once deeply shocking and breath-takingly beautiful. Its contravention of religious taboo, however, would make a longer run impossible. Another production worthy of mention is *Egyptian Ghosts* which uses Egyptian folklore and ritual in a highly theatrical manner to attack the oppression of women. I was particularly delighted when I learnt that the founder of the troupe, Al-Misaharati, and its director, was a woman. About time we had some female directors in the Egyptian theatre, especially if they are of Abeer Ali's calibre !

The other productions, Lamis's *The Bastard Dream*, Bani Mazar's *The Birth*, the Scream's *The Breasts of Tiresias*, the Eagles' *The Game is Still On*, *The Toilets* of the Society of Theatre Artists and *The*

*Master-Servant Dialogue* of the Mirrors troupe did not come up to the standard of either *The Blind or Egyptian Ghosts*. Some of them, however, were much better than the general run-of-the-mill state-funded productions and definitely more ardent and vivacious. Whatever their short-comings, they were never boring.

By the time this article is out, the festival will have wound up, the troupes packed up their props and disappeared into the shadows. But not for long. They will resurface in January at the Cairo Book Fair which is hosting all fifteen productions as part of its cultural activities. Over the fair's ten days, they will be performing free from 3-6 pm at The Tent and Saraya Allam Hall. Take my word for it, they are well worth a visit.

## Out Flew the Web ... :*

***The Independent Theatre Movement three years on***

What is it in Egypt's air these days that blights things with great promise, causing them to wilt and shrivel ? The question had been dogging me since the beginning of the 4th Free Theatre Festival on 3rd January. Already a shadow of its former self, and a sprawling amorphous one at that, the three and half year old movement looks doddering and out of steam.

It seems such a short time ago that we met on that sultry August evening in 1990 at the Acting Frofessions Union to witness its birth and christening and plan its first festival. It was the year of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. In sympathy with the Kuwaitis, our ministry of culture had cancelled its planned annual experimental theatre festival. Many artists disliked the minister's decision and rose up in arms and a campaign for a national theatre festival was spearheaded by theatre critic and actress Minha El-Batrawi. It was at her personal instigation that I and many others went to that memorable meeting on 23rd August.

On that evening, hordes of young people, mostly unknown to us, flocked to the sparsely furnished and poorly lit headquarters of A.P.U. off 26th July street downtown. They crowded the hall and spilled over into the balcony and what a brouhaha there was ! They were all young and ambitious theatre artists looking for 'a place under the sun' and it was under this title that I told their story on this page two years ago.

* 13 January 1994.

Looking over the manifesto they drafted that evening now, I can almost feel it redden and curl up at the corners with shame. What has happened to all the fine ideals, the firey slogans, the heady dreams ? Where is the zestful *esprit de corps*, the glowing *camaraderie* ? Was their defiant stand in those early days mere bravado prompted by the sense of having nothing to lose ?

Already during their first festival one could detect ominous signs of deep cracks despite the apparent solid front. But in the flush of victory they were willingly waved aside. The festival had passed off quite well despite some skirmishes with the ministry of culture, a few inter-group rivalries and a number of hitches. Of the twelve or so self-funded troupes who took part, many showed talent, imagination and technical skill; some troupes in particular — namely, Khalid Galal's Encounter (Liqua'), Tariq Sa'id's Light (El-Daw'), Khalid El-Sawi's Movement (El-Harakah), Sa'id Suliman's Protest (Ihtigag), Ashraf Farouq's Rebels (Al-Mutamaridoon) and Mahmoud Abu Doma's Alternative Theatre — bolstered the festival's credibility and vindicated the whole venture.

The second festival held in December 1991 was a crucial milestone in the development of the movement : it brought the free troupes not only critical acclaim and wider publicity but also official recognition in the form of financial awards to the tune of ten thousand pounds. New groups had joined the movement swelling its membership to 23 companies and some of those newcomers proved valuable assets. One notable example was Abeer Ali's Al-Misaharati troupe who brought their immensely entertaining *Egyptian Ghosts*; another was Mohamed Abul Su'ood's Shrapnel (El-Shazyah); his production, *The Blind*,

performed by candle light in the foyer of Al-Tali'a theatre was one of the highlights of the festival. The founding members too were growing better and stronger with Khalid Galal mounting an ambitious production of Yusuf Idris's *The Striped Ones*, Tariq Sa'id carrying the day with his *Demi-rebels* and Sa'id Suliman debating in his *Arabian Spectacle*, in lively visual terms, Idris's plea for an authentically Egyptian theatrical form. This was happening at a time when the record of the state controlled theatres was, to put it rather mildly, far from encouraging. Is it any wonder then that the ministry of culture was anxious to pluck this newly sprouted feather and stick it in its singularly unadorned cap ?

What the new independent theatre movement troupes lacked sorely were funds and performance spaces and these were dangled like seductive carrots by the ministry. The newly opened Al-Hanager Centre was the magnet that drew them all, and there they were put in the care of a highly respected cultural figure. Huda Wasfi has striven since to guide, support and promote them without curtailing their freedom. Human nature being what it is, however, as Agatha Christie would say, they were only too willing to unload all their burdens onto her patient shoulders and even tried to wheedle her into running them.

Finally secure of a home, however temporary, and of annual government grants, however modest, they underwent a subtle change; gradually their behaviour began to reflect something of the indifference, of the laxity, of the cocky self-assuredness and overweening vanity of the worst state-funded and controlled theatre companies. And now that they didn't have to go around fighting for places to perform or ferreting out a little money here and there and taxing their imagination to make it

go a long way, they found more time to fight among themselves and nurse their petty grievances and illusions of grandeur.

The third festival, held in January 1993 caught them in this deplorably comfortable position, nestling under the broad, protective and well-feathered wings of the state and passing the time in silly squabbles. Some of the older troupes, like Light, Encounter and Shrapnel, and a couple of new ones, Effat Yehya's Caravan and the Arts College Atelier, put up a good fight and produced laudable works that covered up for the rest; the festival was saved and pronounced a success, but it was like the final blaze of a dying fire.

In this year's festival, the fourth, many of the movement's most talented members are conspicuous by their absence; to make matters worse, the general standard of the shows on offer, with extremely rare exceptions, is unbelievably low. I had been prepared for some flops, but not so many disasters. Ten days before the festival a member of its organizing committee rang up to ask if I would be willing to assist in selecting the shows for the contest. I asked how many I would have to see. Fifty, was the daunting answer. 'Why, how many troupes do you have now ?' I asked. 'Sixty,' he answered with a tinge of pride. I could not understand why they left it so late but didn't inquire further. Realizing the impossibility of the task, I suggested, like many other critics and theatre artists they approached for the same purpose, that they elect their own committee from among themselves, and of course I would drop in whenever I could and help in any way I can. And I did; but I wasn't let off the business of adjucation. Three days before the festival, I found my name on the contest's jury list. I was given a copy of the programme and as soon as I perused it I smelt not one but several

rats. I remembered someone telling me a day or so before of a terrible fight that took place among the members immediately after the internal selecting committee had announced its results; it was so violent the security men had to be called in to break it up, I had been told. Well, no wonder; the selecting committee had selected their own troupes to play in the contest and entered them with two or more shows ! The results, some said, were brazenly fraudulent; the committee, however, stuck to their guns. The important question was : were they really elected ? It transpired that 'yes', they were truly elected, but to organize the festival only; the task of selecting the entries was purely self-inflicted. As interested parties with competing shows, how could anyone be expected to elect them as jurers ?

The other five members of the external jury were faced with the same dilemma : they realized from the programme of the contest that there had been foul play; ignoring it would be tantamount to endorsing it and objecting to it would mean interfering in the internal affairs of the Independent Theatre Troupes (unofficial) Union and poking their noses where they were not wanted. All they could do was insist that each troupe be represented in the contest with only one entry and that the shows which had already had a public run be excluded. These alterations, however, did not result in more shows competing, as we had hoped; when the management of Al-Hanager Centre insisted that only one show per day was allowed, we found ourselves with fewer shows to watch (ten instead of seventeen) but with more or less the same groups.

Not that the contest matters really; to our chagrin we discovered that the value of our verdict was only nominal; the prizes we award would

carry no financial weight – indeed, no weight at all since they were going to be little toy pyramids made of styrofoam. What about the LE 30,000 donated by the ministry of culture ? They, we were told the Union had decided, would be distributed in equal portions among the *shows* that took part in the festival regardless of merit. This means, if you hadn't noticed, that the suspect troupe which was originally entered in the contest with four productions would still get four portions of the money even though three of those productions would only play on the fringe of the contest. In short, the Union's self-appointed internal selecting committee had cooked matters in such a way as to guarantee all the troupes they chose a slice of the cake !

By way of a smoke screen, one suspects, the afore-mentioned crafty committee included among its selected 17 items two or three credible choices. They shrewdly opened the festival with Abeer Ali's *Salsabeel*, a feminist, lyrical, impressionistic piece that exposes the plight of women from Pharaonic Egypt down to the present age. The sets and lighting were deeply evocative and the vocal background which combined ritual chanting, intoned recitation, lullabays and nursery rhymes was obsessively haunting and formed the backbone of the show. Except for a few muddled spots, tone-wise, here and there and the occasional overstretching of a scene or a shot at the risk of boredom and tedious repetition, it truly merits admiration and deserves a better festival.

The other bright spot in the contest so far has been a boldly satirical adaptation of Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* by the Freedom troupe where the rhinos are replaced by bearded and 'galabiyad' religious fanatics. The satire acquires a further edge at the end when the fanatics invade the

home of Beranger, the last remaining (beardless) human, accompanied by veiled women in mini skirts !

Sa'id Suliman's *Sa'd El-Yateem* (Sa'd, the Orphan) was intelligently conceived but hopelessly executed. With next to no vocal training, his actors could not carry out the grand epic style of delivery he intended or the choric parts. In choosing an Arab folktale that deals with fratricide, usurpation of power and revenge, in the manner of ***Hamlet***, he hoped to theatrically recreate it into an Arab tragedy in the style of the Greeks. He sought after simplicity, starkness and austerity, with black and white as the only colours and a few symbolic items as the only props : a book, a stick, a prayer mat, three tambours and a small drum. There were no sets, and for religious ritual, he went to the Shi'ite Ta'zeyeh (lamentation) tradition. In the hands of the actors, however, the ritual became embarrassing and the chanting cacophonous. In short, the acting marred all.

The other shows I watched had nothing near an ambitious conception to excuse their shocking failure as theatre, and I doubt that any of the three remaining shows in the contest will prove any better. The problem that faces us all now, the unfortunate and duped members of the jury, is what to do with the ten awards we are supposed to hand out ? Withhold most of them I suppose.

## The Government Steps in Like a Fairy Godmother*

But for a blessed few stirring events and a handful of exciting shows, 1995 would have been a very poor and dull year indeed, theatrically speaking. By far, the most thrilling and significant event has been the decision of the minister of culture to finally acknowledge the existence of the independent theatre groups. At last, these groups will be able to apply for sponsorship to the Cultural Development Fund through a small, enlightened committee of writers, critics and directors — all known for their sympathies with the independent theatre movement. The project got underway some months ago and data on most of the functioning groups is now available at the Fund. Of the ten production projects already submitted to the committee, two were unconditionally approved, four will be reviewed after discussion with the groups proposing them, one was rejected for its palpable weakness, and three were disqualified and referred to the state theatre establishment since they were submitted by professionals working in mainstream theatre. The committee's terms of reference are not limited to the financial support of independent theatrical activity; it has also, within its rights, the capacity to create opportunities for artistic education, training and development — particularly in the provinces where such opportunities are sorely lacking. One of the first decisions the committee took – quite a significant one — was to do all in its power to guarantee for its protegés freedom of thought and expression. This entails finding some lawful means to avoid the censoring of its

* 28 December 1995.

sponsored productions. But even if censorship — in one form or another — proves unavoidable, one may be sure that the committee will fiercely battle to soften its rigours. At last, thanks to the Cultural Development Fund, independent and amateur theatre groups and individuals will have a staunch ally; and although it is yet early days to judge of the project's chances of success, one has every reason to hope that it will prove, at least, a step in the right direction.

# A Question of Space*

The minibus parked opposite the Cultural Development Fund in the Opera grounds looked reassuringly healthy and really quite youthful. It promised a smooth trip with no hiccups, protracted bouts of coughing, sudden strokes or 'engine' attacks. The passengers were members of the Fund's committee for the promotion of independent theatre in Egypt, established about 6 months ago. Predictably, the nine-strong committee had wilted in the heat of August and dwindled in number to two. Our destination was the small town of *Faqqus* in the governorate of Zaqaziq – a mere 2-hour drive from Cairo; there we would watch a performance by a small amateur group and judge whether it was worthy of funding. It was the committee's first venture into the provinces; previous applicants had always brought their projects to Cairo and we sampled them at the small floating theatre in Giza. The *Faqqus* crowd were prepared to do the same, even though they could ill afford the travelling expenses. The fault lay with the committee, or more precisely, with its head — Sami Khashaba.

Samir Gharib, the head of the Fund, had optimistically thought that Khashaba, as head of the state theatre sector, would put some of the resources of the state theatre, particularly performance spaces, in the service of his project. This happened for a while, and the small floating theatre, which is normally out of action for most of the year, became a rehearsal and performance space for many independent and amateur groups. It was there that the committee held its first public meeting with

* 8 August 1996.

their representatives to acquaint them with the project and acquaint itself with their most urgent needs. In this meeting, and in the following months of dealing with various groups, it became absolutely clear that SPACE was what those people most desperately lacked. There are, of course, many youth centres (affiliated to the Ministry of Youth and Sports) and the cultural 'homes' and 'palaces' of the Ministry of Culture; but these are overcrowded, ill-managed, and run by philistine bureaucrats who have a deeply ingrained suspicion of theatre. They still retain the medieval attitude to theatre people, regarding them as vagabonds, outlaws and anarchists.

In meeting after meeting, the committee grappled with the problem of *space* : it was not money that people asked for, but, quite simply, *space* — room to breathe, perform and project all their question marks. This is why the small floating theatre seemed such a godsend. From morning till night, groups shared it, not bothered by the excrutiating heat, the primitive toilets and the erratic, sloppy and exorbitantly-priced catering facilities. Armed with their water flasks, sandwiches and sun-hats, they battled on, and the committee, inspired by their example, stoically braced itself to sit through many a dull, boring, ham performance. It helped that the well-chosen committee had a core of critics prepared to lower their aesthetic standards of excellence to well below the poverty line, and who believed that theatre, in any form, was a kind of social and political protest and a healthy phenomenon.

Then, suddenly, one morning, our head opted out — not physically or officially, but morally. An edict banning all theatre 'vagabonds' from the small floating theatre was issued by Mr. Khashaba. He did not even deign to inform us beforehand. You, the reader, must be wondering

now, and legitimately cursing : Why doesn't the committee rent or buy its own space ? The answer is : I do not know. The committee has been asking and begging for this and for six months has been fobbed off with promises. But even if we rent or buy a rehearsal and performance space in Cairo, what about the provinces ?

As our little, vigorous bus slid along the road to *Faqqus*, bounding merrily across the dangerous stretches of the so-called highway, I remembered Gamal Himdan. In his seminal book, *The Character of Egypt : A Study in the Genius of Place*, he had compared Cairo to an over-enlarged head sitting atop a puny, deformed body with under-developed limbs. I also remembered Mustafa Kamel, the famous patriotic leader, and his proverbial statement : "If I wasn't Egyptian, I would have wanted to be Egyptian." How often had this sentence been drummed into my ears as a schoolgirl ! I found myself, in all honesty, saying : "If I wasn't Cairene, I would have striven to be Cairene." And do you wonder why the countryside is becoming so depopulated ?.

Travelling into the provinces of Egypt is like travelling in *time*, BACKWARDS, not into *space*. It is a kind of schizophrenic experience. I have done it many times, and every time it proves equally dislocating.

When our bold bus finally screeched to a halt in front of the *Faqqus* Cultural Palace, we were greeted with a flurry of confused activity, the purpose of which was to divert our attention from the business in hand. We were whisked to a roadside cafe and offered dinner. We became very suspicious. Eventually we were told that the director of the 'palace' had locked the theatre and gone away with the key to a nearby town to cultivate some personal business !

Eventually we watched the show in a small, drab, neon-lighted room, and it was painfully relevant : about a painter trying to buy some pain-killer for his wife. By the end of the show, we all wanted pain-killers. The fact that another such trip happened within the same week has left me completely prostrate.

## New Impetus*

Despite the persistence of certain vexing ailments — censorship bureaucracy, paucity of venues and lack of money being the most serious and debilitating — 1998 has been on the whole a good year for the independent theatre movement. Compared to previous years the Egyptian productions which took part in the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre (CIFET) this year were notably maturer, more daring, and of a finer artistic quality. For the first time since the start of the festival in September 1988 an Egyptian show, *The Kohl Pillow* by Intisar Abdel Fattah (an independent artist with a group called "Vocal Theatre" who was recently recruited to the state-theatre), walked away with the international jury's award for best performance on account of its progressive feminist message, its original, finely-orchestrated composition, both aurally and visually, and its creative fusing of poetry, dance, and Arabic and African music. The other Egyptian entry in the competition, Al-Warsha's *Spinning Lives*, directed by Hassan El-Gretly, was also by an independent troupe; though it won no prizes, it was highly valued and praised by the jury whose president, George Bartenieff, described it in his final report as "a sensitive, serious and innovative dramatisation of the *Hilaliya* epic, the Egyptian equivalent of the *Iliad*". Of the same production his wife, playwright Karen Malpede, who was a guest of the festival, wrote in *The New York Times* (October 18) that it "extracted from an Egyptian epic an intensity akin to ancient Greek drama". According to her, Al-Warsha "works in an epic ritual theatre tradition akin to that of Ariane Mnouchkine and Peter Brook in Paris". But this is only one aspect of Al-Warsha's work, and

* 31 December 1998.

Karen will be surprised when she hears that this wonderful group, who have a dread of classification and stagnation and an amazing ability to renew and develop themselves and branch out in new directions, are currently involved in developing "an epic of modern daily life", as El-Gretly calls it, based on their personal and social experiences. Meanwhile, work on the *Hilaliya* epic continues side by side with the company's touring and its many valuable para-theatrical activities, particularly in Upper Egypt which has always suffered a chronic and scandalous lack of cultural and other developmental services.

This inspiring side of Al-Warsha's work, which started three years ago in close cooperation with The Jesuit and Frères Association in Al-Menya and other non-governmental organisations, needs to be extensively aired and discussed as a possible model for using theatre in development. It involves workshops and training sessions, in schools and community centres, geared to help both children and adults acquire various artistic skills (making up plays, staging and acting them, stick-dancing, drumming, story-telling, making shadow plays and creating video cartoon films with the help of a simple technique devised in Sweden by Erling Ericasson, a TV producer and animator at the Swedish Educational Broadcasting Company). These and other activities, the philosophy that informs them, and their effect on the community deserve a separate article which I hope to write soon.

Al-Warsha's *Spinning Lives* may not have won a prize but, at least, it has established a welcome and happy precedent. For the first time in the history of this state-organised official event, a private, independent company was chosen to represent Egypt in the international competition. This has galled many in the state-theatre companies but is jubilantly regarded as a tremendous boost and a substantial victory by

all the young theatre artists of the fringe who have long been lightly dismissed by both the state and commercial theatre professionals as amateurs in the derogative sense. At last the work of the earliest and longest surviving independent, non-profit-making group, and the strongest representative of the so-called Independent Theatre Movement (which evolved from the First Free Theatre Festival, organised by critics and artists with some help from the Ministry of Culture but without official interference or control, in 1990) has won this kind of official recognition. The fact that Al-Warsha and two more independent groups — Hani Ghanem's *Al-Masrah Al-Mutamarid* (Theatre of Rebellion) and Maher Sabri's *Al-Maraia* (Mirrors) — had to present their productions under the name of The Cultural Development Fund, a governmental body, was a necessary compromise in order to be seen by the selection committee which decides who enters the competition — (shows without a nominal official umbrella are never considered, let alone seen) — and to obtain a grant towards the costs of the production, usually very modest, a venue and a slot on the festival's programme.

But however meagre the financial assistance provided by the Cultural Development Fund may be, and often is, and although it often tries to take sole credit for the productions it assists even minimally, it remains the one governmental body which least interferes with the work it partially sponsors or supports. It rarely interferes with the production process, or subjects the work to any form of censorship, and its head, Samir Gharib, often displays a relatively remarkable openness of mind and willingness to take risks. Without his help and active protection, and given the increasingly conservative and repressive atmosphere in Egypt right now, two of the most original, exciting, and provocative productions in this year's festival would not have seen the light : Hani

Ghanem's *The Madness of the Gods* (a multi-media performance art piece featuring a universe gone completely mad and intent on destroying itself) and Maher Sabri's *The Harem* which sensitively explored hitherto taboo subjects and ruthlessly exposed what happens to women when treated as commodities and reduced to sex objects.

In these, and some other Egyptian and guest productions in the festival, Karen Malpede detects the emergence of a new style in experimentation "that is still being developed" — an "approach to dramatic truth" which "is complex, meditative, emotional and disarmingly open and honest".

"Though it draws on history, folk and ritual traditions," she goes on to explain, "its proponents refuse to employ it in the service of any ideology, concentrating instead on the yearning of individuals, both entrapped and enriched by tradition." Whether this new style continues to be cultivated and developed in the future depends largely on the scope of freedom and opportunities to work allowed our young artists. For the present, however, the powerful contribution of independent theatre troupes to CIFET 1998 has given the theatre in Egypt a new impetus and a much needed dose of optimism.

The last 12 months also saw a welcome return by Al-Hanager Theatre to its former policy (inexplicably neglected for a while) of encouraging young new talent rather than sponsoring big productions by established artist. The most prominent new production in this respect was the extremely popular *The Island of the Bald*, which introduced not only a promising new playwright, Abdel-Fattah El-Beltagi, and a gifted new director, Rami Imam, but also a number of exciting new acting talents. Al-Hanager also promised more performances by new talents in the coming year.

# Betrayal*

All through the summer they met, sometimes once, but more often twice or more a week. In between meetings there were long telephone calls, morning, noon and night. They had been restless for quite sometime, feeling at a loose end, that life was slipping away, ambitions were diminishing, and dreams fast fading. After years of work, the future still seemed an unknown quantity, and they looked into it with growing apprehension. They had fought for long to achieve a modicum of recognition; but, increasingly, they felt like someone skating on a thin crust of ice over a deep, deep lake. They knew that they could spend months scripting, designing and rehearsing, only to be rewarded with a kindly let down, a profusion of elaborate excuses, or a curt rebuff. If they get a work through, they feel elated; but underneath, there is always a gnawing sense of insecurity, of threat — the debilitating fear that it may very well be their last. And however successful the work may prove, it does not guarantee future opportunities; it remains an isolated point in the stream of days, with no extension in the past or future — a fluke rather than part of the flow of a cumulative process.

With every work, the same hazardous battle has to be fought all over again, and year after year it corrodes their youthful zest and viciously consumes their energy. Some eventually give up and surrender, sinking into a state of apathy and artistic inersia, or end up resigning themselves to other careers and a blank existence. In one case, Nadir Salaheddin's, a once young and promising playwright and

* 4 November 1999.

director whose work (the little of it he was allowed to do) displayed a lot of imaginative freshness, withdrew from the scene and lapsed into silence for a number of years. When he surfaced again, he had swung to the other extreme and joined the ranks of the commercial theatre as a minor dramaturge in the service of hack writers. It is a prospect that many of those young artists who met all through last summer fithfully envisage as a last resort and deeply dread.

And so, suddenly last summer, one sweltering morning in June, twenty of them converged on Maysa Zaki's flat in Agouza – a theatre critic of their generation who had sounded the alarm. Her husband, Omar Nigm, a talented poet and budding dramatist, had died a few years ago at the age of 36 when his heart could no longer take the strain. Some of her guests knew each other only by name, and most of them had not met socially before — making theatre as an independent troupe leaves little time for socialization except with one's own group. They represented diverse artistic trends and approaches to theatre and different intellectual and existential orientations; but they all had in common a genuine respect for each other's work and shared the belief that they were together in the same leaking boat and members of the same endangered species. In the foreground of that meeting, however, was a vivid, urgent awareness of the pressing need to revive the independent theatre movement and its Free Theatre festival, launched in the winter of 1990. Some of them, like the members of The Movement and The Light troupes, had been part of that first festival; others had joined it in subsequent years; but all had gone on believing in its goals and principles even after its demise in 1994.

In Maysa's classical dining-room, with its heavy, solid oak furniture, there was barely enough space for all of them; some shared a chair, or took turns sitting down, while others leaned against the window, shuttered against the blazing sun and heat, or one of the two sideboards lining the walls. The surface of the other was completely covered with a plentiful supply of tea and coffee, bottles of soft drinks and mineral water, and a variety of small cakes and biscuits. On the polished top of the oak table which ate up most of the room sat a neat little pile of white notepaper, with a row of ball pens lined beside it. It all looked friendly, hospitable and businesslike. For the next 3 hours those young men and women were deep in earnest discussion, pouring out their hearts and minds as liberally as they poured their drinks, airing their fears and anxieties groping for solutions, sifting through alternatives, thrashing out different courses of action, and carefully defining their short and long term goals. By the end of that first meeting, a firm bond had been formed.

Other meetings followed, and as differences of views were ironed out it was agreed that the first step to rally support for the long-term independence project and give it wide publicity was to revive the Free Theatre Festival under the slogan 'Now or Never' and hold it at the beginning of the year 2000. A tentative proposal was drafted, outlining the aims, shape and size of the festival, its logistics, basic material requirements and total budget. A budget summary and cost breakdown were also appended.* After many careful revisions — to fill out details, remove redundancies and irrelevancies and ensure the right tone and phrasing — a final version was approved, translated into French and

* The full text of the proposal is printed in an appendix at the end of the book.

English by members of the groups, and printed in all three languages. On the first page of the English version one reads : "This festival is an assertion of our existence as independent theatrical groups which have succeeded in working for 10 years under exhausting conditions and despite crippling production restrictions that are threatening us with extinction .... Ten years have passed since the First Free Theatre Festival held in 1990. While that event, we believe, led to some recognition of our status, the rights we dreamt of and barely dared to demand then are now urgent necessities".

From the assersion of their existence they move on, in the statement of purposes section, to the assertion of their "right to make independent theatre through the adoption of a new formula for theatrical production and performance, namely the Non-Profit Professional Company." A tall order and they know it; but there is no other alternative. It is true that five of the ten groups who launched this venture work mainly through Al-Hanager which provides a venue and subsidies or production costs whenever it can, and that three of the remaining five produced some work under the legal umbrella of the Cultural Development Fund and with its financial help. "However," as the proposal says, and it is a big HOWEVER in print, "after practicing theatre for several years, these groups have realized that :

* Loose and random collaborations do not provide the minimum requirements they need to grow and develop at a rate commensurate with the development of their artistic abilities.
* Nor will the current working conditions allow them to become professional (non-profit) theatre companies entitled to legal and financial status."

Of the many crippling restrictions these groups face, the proposal mentions : "The scarcity of adequate performance spaces to accommodate the volume of theatrical activity in Egypt today .... The prohibitive cost of renting such spaces as are available. The existence of a bureaucracy that effectively deters independent groups from using state theatre spaces even when they are not in use. Restrictive laws that prohibit the use of non-traditional performance spaces." And, finally, that the "organizations that are currently supposed to fund these groups do not have or implement a policy to sustain them or further their growth and development".

In all fairness, however, one must admit that such organizations, and Al-Hanager and the Fund are clearly meant though not named, are overloaded with applications for performance and rehearsal spaces and funds, and cannot possibly meet the demands and needs of all the old independent groups, let alone of those rapidly mushrooming all over the country. The proposal recognizes this and uses it tacitly to corroborate and justify a new production formula which involves the state (in the form of annual grants, tax concessions, lower publicity rates in the state-owned media, and nominal rents for state-owned performance spaces), as well as private sponsors and local and international funding institutions. On their side, the groups, when funds are available, will establish their own permanent centre which will comprise "an office to fulfill production, organizational and fundraising needs for all independent companies year-round," and several "performance and rehearsal spaces run by the groups themselves".

This may sound somewhat utopian; but for the groups, at the time they drafted it, it seemed a very realistic proposition. And so, they boldly set forth, each armed with a dozen copies of the cherished

proposal, and sought out their assigned targets. These included rich businessmen, multinational corporations, foreign cultural centres and international foundations, prestigious companies in the commercial theatre, some local NGOs and private institutions and, of course, and first of all, the ministry of culture through the heads of its various organizations.

The initial responses were thrilling. An influential friend of a member of the groups – a veteran director of the commercial theatre – promised to put the groups in touch with a number of tycoons and secure them fat (or so they seemed to the dazed groups) sums of money. The head of GEBO, Samir Sarhan, generously ticked off the items of the budget he could provide which amounted to something like LE 25,000. The Dutch cultural counsellor, the British Council, and the Swiss ProHelvetia suggested various forms of cooperation, including money, and the head of the Arab Arts Project (of the Ford Foundation) promised to help.

But everything hinged on securing the official sponsorship of the ministry of culture; otherwise, the groups, who had no legal status as an NGO, a company, or anything else, could not accept, indeed, would not be offered in the first place, any donations whether in cash or services, and could not perform anywhere. It was therefore that two members made their way one morning in July to the office of Gaber Asfour, the head of the Supreme Council for Culture and asked him to put the festival under the official umbrella of the Council and become their spokesman, mediator and official figurehead. He accepted and promised to do his best to secure the minister's approval of the project and LE 100,000 towards its costs. It meant two thirds of the budget.

10 days later he met one of the organizers in the foyer of the Opera at the opening of the National Film Festival and told her : 'It is done. The minister said O.K. and will give you the LE 100,000. It was too good to be true, many felt, suspecting a catch somewhere. Only a formal public announcement or, even better, an official decree would quell all doubts. They waited in suspense.

For two weeks they heard nothing. And when they finally managed to track down the elusive, ever busy Asfour, they were in for a shock. Unbeknown to them, the proposal had been shuttled over to the Cultural Development Fund, and far from having been approved by the minister, it was being studied by the Fund's head who would eventually want to meet them to discuss it. A week later, they started pressing for an appointment with Salah Shaqueer (the new head of the CDF who replaced Samir Gharib) and were told he would see them on Saturday 28 August at 1.30 p.m. But before the meeting took place they had another and more devastating shock.

On 25 August, the minister of culture held a press conference to announce a new policy to support independent theatre groups through annual grants to the tune of LE 10,000 or LE 20,000 for each approved group. Still dazed by this unexpected blow, the 'Now or Never' planners attended the conference *en masse*. Six out of their ten groups were named among the beneficiaries; nevertheless, each and everyone of them felt robbed and cheated. The go-ahead sign they were given – Asfour's "it's done" had been nothing but plain deceit — a ploy to fob them off for a while until the ministry hit upon an effective way to quench the idea. Not only were they publicly discredited in the eyes of their prospective funders, but also, and that was "the unkindest cut of

all", whole phrases were lifted out of their proposal verbatim and used to adorn the official announcement.

The message was clear and the project was virtually dead. And yet, some of the members decided to meet Shaqueer's appointment if only to call his bluff. They did not find him at his office, only a message saying he had a meeting with the executive committee of the Experimental Theatre Festival due to open in three days.

Two months later, when all the dust had settled down, I sat in the darkened auditorium of Al-Hanager, watching with mounting sympathy and rising bitterness the Theatre Atelier troupe's desperate, almost heroic struggle to fit what they could of the script of the famous Shaunberg-Kritnmer musical, *Les Miserables* (translated by Samir Sarhan) to their extremely humble means, and even make a virtue of their poverty. The versatile decor (by Ibrahim Gharib), made up of geometrical shapes which the actors themselves assembled and dismantled to construct different sets, Mohamed Ali's stirring and rich melodies, Sa'id Hagag's intelligent abridgement of the text which he cast in colloquial Arabic, and his new lyrics adapted from the original, and the team of actors who constantly doubled, with some performing as many as four characters — these and other aspects bore the true marks of talent and inventiveness. Nevertheless, and despite Hassan Abdo's directorial knack for musicals, the uniformely ascetical grey-and-white colour-palette of the show, the bare austerity of the sets, the frugal choreographic design, the ludicrously unpeopled barricade scenes and street battles, together with the absence of live music and singing (which can alone wreak havoc even with spectacular musicals) transmitted a clear message apart from that of the play, and told another story side by side with that of Victor Hugo's.

Hassan Abdo and his troupe had been part of the 'Now or Never' wild-goose chase, and here they were, back to square one, struggling once more to accommodate themselves to the crippling production conditions and restrictions they had dreamt of altering last summer. The LE 20,000 they had been promised "to set themselves up properly as an independent theatre troupe", in the words of the minister, apart from being ridiculously inadequate, have not materialized, and many doubt they ever will. *Les Miserables* tells you, among other things, that nothing has changed, that the title is a fitting label for the actors on stage as much as for the characters they represent, and that Huda Wasfi, who sponsored and funded this work, remains the only true and honest champion of these troupes in the whole of the ministry of culture – simply because she helps them all she can and never lies to them or gives them false hopes. With her they know exactly where they are, and it is definitely better than on the streets.

## Slowly but Surely*

It is often the case that in CIFET what happens behind the scenes is infinitely more intriguing, instructive and thought-provoking than what you see on the boards. This year's session was no exception.

The gripping off-stage drama started one month before the opening ceremony when the three-member international selection committee, entrusted with the onerous task of deciding which of the dozens of foreign and Arab shows coming to the festival are to take part in the international contest, arrived in Cairo and were instantly spirited away to some mysterious five-star hideout to sift through more than 47 videos of hopeful, would-be candidates. In previous years, the committee consisted of three European white males, from Britain, France and Spain, all over 60; this year, however, and as a result of pressure from the local press and the community of theatre artists, led by American playwright Caren Malpede, the committee was chaired by a prestigious femme de theatre from the States — a vast improvement, though not exactly what one would call "devoutly to be wished," since all three members are still over 60, and all from the western hemisphere. Mind you, neither I, Caren, nor any of our young theatre artists in Egypt care a pin what nationality or creed an artist carries; we are even very much in favour of abolishing the question of "nationality" and religious faith from the festival all together and considering people and troupes as representing themselves and humanity in general rather than countries or ideologies. But, when you have politics, in the widest possible sense of the word, rammed down your throat, particularly in

* 13 September 2001.

these savage, conflict-riddin days, what can you do except shut your eyes, pinch your nose, jump in and try to swim against the tide.

Whatever criteria the international selection committee used, and doubtless it was honest, objective and technically informed, left a lot of people, Egyptians, foreigners, and myself, profoundly confused as to what this festival was all about and what we mean when we trot out the word experimental. When Cypriot artist Arianna Economou asked me at the small hall of the Opera house, just before the Japanese show started, on what basis shows were chosen for the contest, I did not know what to say. Hers, and many other shows which were rejected, corresponded to my personal definition of what rates as experimental. In a few words, something which within its cultural context would be considered — in terms of form and content — tentative, groping, questioning, rebellious, and, above all, unsettling, preferbly shocking in one way or another. What exacerbated the confusion was the appearance of the Saudi Arabian *The Dark Corner* on the jury's schedule. Was that a political compromise ? And if it was, why was it not extended to other shows from Gulf countries who have some kind of a theatre tradition and who, more to the point, allow women into the theatrical profession ?

A Saudi friend of mine, a delightful, highly educated person, asked me if I was against the Saudi theatre per se. My answer was simply : what Saudi theatre ? I spent a semester in Jedda teaching Shakespeare to wonderful young people who happened to be all female at King Abdul Aziz University and I scoured the whole city, the most enlightened and liberal in all of Saudi Arabia, looking for a theatre and found none. And over the whole of the life of CIFET and other Arab theatre festivals so

far, I have waited for a glimmer of hope, a hint change, but have always been rewarded with nothing but all-male shows, with, to top everything, a plaster statue of Ophelia in a *Hamlet*-based play. Admittedly, the few Saudi plays I have seen, in Arab festivals outside that kingdom, had a seditious, subversive seed in the sense of being well camouflaged protests against political dictatorship, globalization or western hegemony; but however hard one looked, one could not find so much as a faint murmur against the oppressive sway of rigid religious dogma or the flagrant discrimination against women. When I was on the CIFET international jury some years ago, the other Egyptian member, an over sixty once promising male director who, for personal, political, and family reasons, spent the flower of his youth teaching in some oil rich Arab Gulf state, said to me that we should perhaps give the Saudi company participating that year some kind of recognition. His argument was that it would help Saudi theatre artists. I was not so sure that it would not instead help further solidify the banning of women from theatre. Was I not being too political ? I was asked. Well, I said, "if I go into a theatre and suddenly find myself regressing to 5th century B.C. Greece or to Elizabethan England when women were not allowed on the stage, how can I help being conscious of the sexual politics underlying the event ?" Indeed, as a woman, I always find it extremely embarrassing, even insulting and mortifying, to be invited as a critic or juror to a theatre where women are not allowed on the stage and be expected to clap or give a prize. The most experimental thing the Saudi artists could do, I concluded, was to let an actress appear on stage. Then, and only then, would they deserve a prize and I would be the first to clamour for it.

This *is* political, there is no escaping it. But it is not ideology-oriented political in the traditional sense. Rather, a question of human rights and of not being exploited as a fortunate female in a repressive patriarchal system against my sisters in Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan or, even, the once progressive Kuwait where the elected Parliament there still refuses women the vote. I suppose anything experimental has to be, by definition, deeply political in the profoundest sense of the word. Besides, however passionately one may believe in cultural diversity, it should never be used as an excuse to condone the most outrageous forms of discrimination.

The second act of our CIFET off-stage drama takes us a little further on to 10 days before the opening and the adventures of the nine-member Egyptian committee, appointed by the Minister of Culture, to choose the two Egyptians entries in the international contest. On the first day of their exhausting mission, they were informed that one of the two female members had officially withdrawn for personal reasons. I cannot pretend I was sorry; it would give our young artists a break from her stuffy, censorious moral views. Nevertheless, when I heard this I could not help remembering my dear friend Velia Papa, the director of the Italian In-Teatro theatre festival, who was supposed to be with us this year but had to stay back in Polverigi to nurse her ailing mother and I thought, God, aren't women always landed with the jobs that nobody else is prepared to do ? A couple of days later the committee was reduced to seven since film star, Nur El-Sherif, stopped showing up. It baffles me why every year he, delightful as he is and always a pleasure to see, has to be on the committee. He normally shows up a couple of times then disappears, due, naturally, to functions of more import to his cinema and television career.

The ten-day tour of the state-theatres of Cairo, which encompassed nearly 20 productions from the various governmental theatre organisations, ended on 31 August, in an obscure venue, the Naguib El-Rihani Cultural Palace. A once graceful white villa where the famous comedian and actor briefly lived, bequeathing to it his name after he left it, has now fallen on hard times, deteriorating into a nondescript, rundown building tucked away in a maze of narrow alleys in Hadayeq El-Quba, and hedged all round with a forbidding forest of gray concrete walls. Since all had protested they could never find their way there, a ramshackle bus herded them to their destination. The menu mentioned three provincial courses with two 15-minute intervals in between to change the sets. The tiny theatre on the third floor was so pathetically primitive it made you want to cry. The venerable committee had just been to the big hall of the Opera house to watch Walid Aouni's *The Life Jacket Under the Seat*, which had all the privileges that huge and rich establishment could offer, and now they were sitting in that cramped, neon-lit space gazing at a platform that hardly qualified as a stage and watching all those palapably under-nourished young people struggling with antidiluvian bulbs, switches and keys. No wonder none of them took the event seriously. It was just a gesture to the provincial theatre to make those people feel they were there, still on the map.

The first performance, *The End of the Journey*, was from Upper Egypt — a deliciously naïve collage of the epic dramas of peasant life by the late poet and playwright Naguib Sorour. The set, costume and lighting were distressingly poor and the acting was atrociously ham. No technical polish here. But the actors themselves, led by a very brave young woman, played with a kind of passionate sincerity. And, viewed in their cultural context, they were definitely experimental. They had

dared the strict traditions of their conservative society in the south and put a woman on stage, in the lead, and had even let her hold hands and embrace one of the actors. In Luxor, where these actors came from, their performance would definitely create a stir and be regarded as highly adventurous.

Whether by coincidence or design, the second show, from Alexandria, blazoned the word "end" in its title. *The End of the Road* was nothing but explosive. Technically it was equally primitive; but the two talented actors who wrote the script wove this fact into their show, turning it to an advantage. Featuring two stage-struck youths, looking for an opening in the theatre world, it deftly revealed all the obstacles that beset any young person embarking on a stage career in Egypt today. The fictional setting was Alexandria; but with the auditorium crammed full of frustrated young artists from that beautiful coastal city, reality usurped the place of make-believe and it was not surprising to find emotions running high when the two actors raised the issue of the Cairo Opera House taking over their old and beloved Sayed Darwish theatre. They had hoped it would be their national theatre, that, at last, Alexandria would have a resident theatre company; but now that the Opera organisation has stepped in, they — the actors of Alexandria — would be in the street. And *The End of the Road* spelled the end of their tether. The show ended in a riot with everyone screaming they had a right to exist, to have a place under the sun. Interviewed about this issue by one of the actors in the course of the performance, a member of the committee said it was neither the time or place to discuss such issues and that raising this problem was extraneous to the show and had actually damaged it artistically. Thank you very much, they said, for nothing.

When the third performance, *Black Mass*, by Amiri Baraka (or, Leroy Jones, as he was called before converting to Islam during the Black Civil Rights Movement in the States in the 1960s) started, everyone, actors, audience and selection committee were so emotionally exhausted they could not focus on anything. The actor playing the monster (read white man) created by the black witch-doctor of the tribe, Jacob, a la Dr. Frankenstein, was fittingly and quite grotesquely repulsive, hissing, groaning and barking until he was blue in his stockinged face. I was worried all the time he would suffocate and thought that that company from Damanhour displayed the worst and most pernicious effects of 13 years of CIFET. All they seemed to have learnt from watching foreign shows was that to be experimental you had to flog your actors to death.

It was well after midnight when *Black Mass* ended. The worn-out, sweat-drenched committee, all vigorous in mind and young at heart, but with the youngest bearing the weight of 56 years on her back, retired to a small room to prepare their verdict. With four of the members belonging and still clinging to the propagandist, ideologically committed, word-based Egyptian theatre of the 1960's, and one member a devout upholder of conservative Islamic morality, it was no wonder the discussion was loud and heated and lasted for nearly four hours. When *Meta Phaedra* came up for discussion, the head of the committee, playwright Samir Sarhan, discovered he had more than ideological and artistic proclivities to deal with. He had to battle with the incomprehensible but, nevertheless, very obstinate prejudice against any show by an independent theatre group, in this case, Sharpnel, coming from Al-Hanager. Out of the 20 plays they had watched, only three survived the many rounds of voting following interminable

discussions. Two of those were by independent theatre groups. Al-Ma'bad's *A Trip to Nowhere*, written and directed by Ahmed El-Attar, and Sharpnel's *Meta Phaedra*. Against them was Walid Aouni's *Life Jacket Under the Seat*. Once more, the Opera, with its awesome financial and administrative arsenal was facing the fringe and trying to edge them off the scene. The fervent protests of the young Alexandrian artists seemed to reverberate in the room like background incidental music.

The final verdict was a difficult compromise which sadly sacrificed El-Attar's dramatic bus tour. The Opera's *Jacket* and Sharpnel's *Phaedra* were chosen, but with many provisos concerning the latter. A scene had to be removed as well as certain objectionable words. The text had not yet got into the hands of the censor, and it is one of the great achievements of Al-Hanager's director, Hoda Wasfi, that she managed to cajole the censor into allowing it to perform in the festival before passing through his office. Thanks to her it reached the festival audience unadulterated, in all its beautiful, invigorating integrity, establishing an important precedent in the festival's history and scoring a significant victory for freedom of thought and expression in Egypt. For this, *Meta Phaedra* will be long remembered and cherished by CIFET audiences, theatre lovers and human rights activists in Egypt. It will also be remembered as the one show representing Egypt in the international contest which was allowed only one day and one performance (for the jury) in the whole history of CIFET. But the resourceful young Sharpnel outwitted the authorities and did something almost suicidal, performing three times in succession in the single evening allowed them. And if this is not truly experimental, what is ?

## Coming of Age*

### The Regional Theatre Clubs and Free Theatre Movement Celebrate Their 12th Anniversary.

Imagine trying to cover two busy festivals, running simultaneously, and fitting in five shows a day, four of which are scheduled at the same time in 2 different venues ! Throughout the whole of last week I attempted to accomplish this forbidding task, with the thoroughly disorienting result of having the avalanche of graphic impressions which inundated me each day merging willy-nilly in my head as I crawled into bed every night and forming the weirdest imaginable kind of surrealistic, nightmarish kaleidoscope.

The bald, neurotic young hero in Gamal Yaqoot's adaptation of Mario Fratti's 1963 Italian melodrama, *The Cage* – translated for the *Theatre Magazine* in 1982, and recklessly performed with plenty of erotic abandon by El-Anfoushi theatre club at the opening of the regional theatre clubs festival, at Al-Hanager, on 28 February – haunted me every night, adamantly refusing to be confined to the space allotted him in either the Italian text or Egyptian production. Thoroughly disgusted with the world, he locks himself up in the play in a man-size bird cage (complete with toilet), pitched right in the middle of the family's living-room, within titillating sight of his brother's make-shift conjugal couch, and spends his time reading Chekov and entertaining sexual fantasies of his seductive, siren-like sister-in-law, who eventually seduces him into killing his brother then jilts him. The play

* March 2002.

leaves him, still in his cage, raving and ranting and venting his wrath upon the world. In my dreams, however, he managed to sneak out and merge with the deranged hero of Sa'd Mekkawi's *The Art of Dying* who, on the following night, sadistically dragged the hapless audience onto Al-Hanager stage and seated them in the most uncomfortable cramped positions, round a lugubrious, over-littered, tomb-like set.

The hero this time was a religious maniac and critic-loather – a painter who begins his career with the murder of an art critic who did not like his paintings (a gruesome warning to all the critics present) and ends up, in exile, slaughtering an innocent, poor blacksmith, whom he had hired as a model, to make a life-like painting of Christ on the cross, with real human blood sprayed over the canvas. Sa'd Mekkawi's play (directed by Yusef El-Naqeeb and performed with grim seriousness and lots of candles – more than any fire-safety regulations would allow in such a cramped space – by El-May theatre club) was not, however, without some kind of bizarre fascination. Squatting between two rough-edged benches, for lack of seats, in that stuffy, claustrophobic atmosphere, gazing at the corpse draped in a dirty sheet and stretched on a bier-like bed, fringed with candles, which formed the centre-piece of the set and ate up most of the performance space, I gradually began to feel dizzy, as if hypnotized by that religious maniac and his ritualistic killings.

The images presented in *Carnival 2002*, written and directed by Mohamed Abdel Mu'ti and Osama Mahmoud, respectively, for the Beni Sweif Club, were equally nightmarish, with 2 fussy demonic dancers, plenty of spiders' webs sprawled everywhere, voluminous black shrouds, and skulls galore. The message, however, was overtly

political and the overall conception embarrassingly simplistic. The doomed victim, a veiled girl, thickly swathed in layers of black and waving the obligatory-in-such-plays olive-branch was obviously Palestine, her Don Quixotic knight-in-shining-armour the all-too-conventional theatrical symbol of the Arab nations, while the vigorous, nimble, wily dancers who eventually kill her naturally signified Israel – who else ? The only intellectually valid and theatrically potent moment in this otherwise uniformly insipid and sentimental presentation of the Arab-Israeli conflict was when the female victim, finally certain of her death, suddenly ripped off her veil and cast off her thick, black robes, revealing underneath a fighter's overall. This brave gesture may not have saved her life, but, at least, it pointed in the right direction, obliquely suggesting a deeper cause for her tragic fate and one of the major negative aspects of Arab culture – namely, the continued oppression and marginalization of women.

*The Qaraqoz*, a political skit on contemporary Arab reality from the same Beni-Sweif theatre club, performed by three clowns against a traditional street-puppet-show booth, with plenty of cross-dressing and slapstick farce, sported a similar daring moment which shocked many members of the audience, including some critics. The first half hour seemed to ramble with little promise of anything new or exciting; the gags and gambols were hackneyed and the humour generally sluggish, This went on until two of the clowns decided to perform a sketch called *The Rape of Palestine*. The one playing Israel dressed up as a thug; the other, representing Palestine, cross-dressed as a woman. They meet in the stereotypical alley of old Egyptian movies, and in the heat of the rape attempt, the villain gloatingly boasts to his victim that he is her father's murderer. In a fit of rage, she tries to take revenge. During the

scuffle, suddenly the call for prayers peals out. This scene is familiar to the audience from countless corny Egyptian movies and whenever it occurs in the cinema, be sure the *Muezzin's* voice will strike terror into the villain's heart, paralyzing his hand and miraculously preventing the crime.

In the *Qaraqoz*, however, no such miracle transpired. The call for prayers here was not like anything you would normally hear from a minaret, or even on radio or television, but the mechanical, tinny, squeaky one lately made familiar by the avalanche of Ramadan lanterns imported from China which inundated the Egyptian market during the last holy month. As soon as the canned prayer-call was heard, the action went into slow-motion and, to make matters worse, once it stopped, the 'good' sinned-against heroine dropped dead on the spot, as if struck by a bolt from the blue. The message, that no appeal to Heaven (particularly one issuing from an imported squeaking plastic toy for an over-commercialized religious month) could ever alone save Palestine, completely overturned audience expectations and proved too savagely ironical to easily swallow, even when washed down with a bucketful of laughter.

The sense of siege, of impotence, hopelessness and humiliation cropped up in many other shows in a wide range of moods and styles and with varying degrees of anger and rebelliousness. Marwa Farouk's *The Body and Soul Sonata*, from Menya, Zakariya Ahmad Hassan's *A World of Glass*, from Marsa Matrouh, Khalid Tawfiq's *Blue Dreams*, or *Tomorrow I Shall Buy Wings*, from El-Nasr Club, *Let's Come*, from El-Qabari Club, El-Anfoushi Club's *The End of the Wall* (both from Alexandria), and Husam El-Ghamri's *Irish Dogs*, from

Luxor – all displayed defeated, beleaguered young men and women, from different walks of life, confined in cages, cells, to wheelchairs, or behind real or metaphorical walls and bars, constantly oppressed by the hereditary symbols of authority – social, parental, political or religious – and ardently longing for freedom and self-fulfillment. However, the most poignant, imaginatively inventive and artistically polished variation on this sad and depressing theme – the real gem of this festival – was another Anfushi Club production, called *Sa'a fi-Albak* (An Hour in Your Heart), collectively written by the four young performers and directed by the same Sherif Desouki who played the lead in *The Cage*.

The title, *Sa'a fi-Albak*, is an obvious ironical play on the name of a famous 1950's radio comedy show called *Sa'a li-Albak* (Happy Hour) which caricatured scenes from everyday life then in short, hilarious sketches. In presenting us with an updated, more caustic version of this old comic show, was Desouki and his team implicitly trying to tell us that the gentle fun we enjoyed back then can no longer exist ? That the follies and foibles of humanity have since grown far more tragic and more devastating. In a series of ebullient, side-splitting and devastatingly honest mini sketches, Desouki's four young actors (two men and two women in jeans and T-shirts, using their real names) reviewed their lives from birth to adulthood in an attempt to discover the reasons behind their abiding sense of futility, powerlessness and oppression. Their giddying trip down memory lane reveals to us, in quick, successive flashes, that the real culprit is the authoritarian deep structure of our whole culture, manifested in all our institutions and even our most private and intimate relationships. The domination-subservience ethos, which governs our lives from birth till death, enshrines 'obedience' as the highest value, the golden rule, the

ultimate good, and, therefore, keeps reproducing the same ossified system and generation after generation of stunted, stultified creatures who are never allowed the chance to flower and fulfill their individual potentials. In scene after hilarious scene, we were shown how people are crippled from birth, denied any breathing space, drained of any initiative and transformed into automatons who only know how to follow orders.

The grimness of this pessimistic vision, however, was effectively countered by the energy and versatility of the young actors, their robust sense of humour, a spatter of lively songs and light tunes, and, above all, by the bright and colourful children's-picture-book visual style of the whole production. And to guard against tragedy ever breaking through the thin, sparkling coat of sugar-icing, the poignancy of the revelations was lyrically softened by intermittent film sequences showing the four young people walking into the sea, floating on its waves, gazing into the distance or at the sky above and wondering whether something better lay on some other distant shore.

While the annual contest of the regional theatre clubs was in full swing at Al-Hanager, on the other side of El-Gala' bridge, at the Russian Cultural Centre in El-Tahrir street, eight of the independent theatre troupes who, back in 1990, established what has since become known as the Independent Theatre Movement, were busy cutting a tedious umbilical chord and making a concrete declaration of independence from the state by holding their first ever truly free theatre festival – a festival (unlike the four they previously held between 1990 and 1994) completely organized, financed and run by themselves, without state interference of any kind, and, more to the point, without

state censorship. Though dedicated to 'light comedy', it was, as you would expect, a highly political event. Whatever the kind or quality of the shows presented (and most of them were repeats which you would have already seen at Al-Hanager, like Shrapnel's *Jacques and his Master*, Wikalat El-Ghori, like the Light troupe's *Fragments of Diamond*, the French Cultural Centre, like The Caravan's *The Diary of Fatma* or *The Hungry Dream of the Bread Market*, or any other foreign or state- owned venue, or, at least read about them in reviews published on this page when they were first performed), they all clamoured for freedom (the absence of which the *Sa'a fi-Albak* Alexandrian team so sorely mourned) and tirelessly asserted their right to exist, express themselves freely and defend all the oppressed and marginalized sections of society.

As I toed and froed between Al-Hanager and the Russian Cultural Centre, it suddenly struck me that both festivals had come into existence exactly 12 years ago. 1990, the year of the Gulf War, marked, ominously or auspiciously, the birth of both events. Early that year, I remember it was cold and drizzly, I boarded one of the notoriously rickety buses of the Mass Culture establishment (it hadn't yet been given the more chic title of "cultural palaces") with a friendly crowd of theatre reviewers. It carried us to the coastal city of Damietta where the birth of the regional theatre clubs was announced with appropriate aplomb. The governor was there, and so was the then head of the Mass Culture organization.

What I most vividly remember of that visit, though, are the cold drafts, issuing from mysterious sources or venting points (invaluable in summer, but deadly in winter), the bare, grimy tiles of what looked like long deserted halls, the tepid, thickly sugared, endless glasses of black

tea and, curiously, a vague impression of a forest of poorly painted wooden poles and flats thinly camouflaged as sets. Practically whatever we saw seemed to fiercely clash with the pomp and circumstance of the official reception and the proclaimed intentions in the hype-filled official speeches. But what was really heart-warming, even fitfully exhilarating, was an elusive sense of liberation – an intense, rebellious longing for freedom that glimmered here and there, more often than not taking the form of a naïve, obstreperous flouting of all aesthetic rules. Were all those young people, I fatuously wondered then, in a fleeting moment, looking for some kind of new aesthetic – an aesthetic of ugliness ?

The following year, in Isma'ilia, where the second festival was held, did not settle this question. Some of the performances we watched were garishly rebellious, nauseatingly honest, and definitely ugly in a fascinating, quite unforgettable sort of way. Others had so much subtlety and finesse you wouldn't connect them with the same cultural context. The daily bulletin of the current festival at Al-Hanager has a documentary section. In its second issue, I found an Arabic translation of a review of the event I had written and published at the time in *Al-Ahram Weekly*. In that old review, I defeneded the new aesthetic of ugliness, the untamed, anti-bourgeois shock tactics of a play called *Talk Market* which involved a plentiful display of dirt, savagery and brutal cruelty in a mix of apocalyptic prophecy and slice-of-life naturalism. The same review sported a photo of a lovely young woman, called Maysa El-Rifa'i in a production called *The Right to Emotional Asylum*. That picture stood in diametrical opposition to the filthy figures who littered the stage in *Talk Market* and dressed the sense of rebellion rampant in that festival in the colours of the rainbow. Waiting at the bus

stop, in Azza Badr's/Mohamed El-Shafei's sad, comic script, Maysa had wrung our hearts with her humorously voiced sorrows and impossibly romantic longings.

Where is Maysa El-Rifa'i now ? Still waiting at her metaphorical bus stop, dreaming of emotional asylum ? Or married with a handful of kids and probably veiled ? As I watched this year's festival, the $12^{th}$, which featured some lovely actresses in difficult and daring parts, plus the debut of a female dramatist from conservative Menya in Upper Egypt, I found myself pondering the question of continuity – not the continuity of the festival (it shall probably go on as long as it is politically and propaganda–wise useful), but the possible life-span of the young artists who bear its burden. Regional theatre festivals – clubs, or otherwise – are notoriously tough and ruthless; they pick the best available talents for a one-time job, paying them nothing, then discard them without a thought. Most of those regional artists are supposed to be grateful for this once-in-a-lifetime-opportunity without hope for continuity or further development. Year after year, if you follow those festivals, the most abiding feeling is one of missing, of wondering where people you have loved and admired go.

Was it for this, to combat the once-flower-then-wither tacit policy of most state theatre organizations in Egypt, that the hordes of young theatre artists who met at the headquarters of the Acting Professions Union in down-town Cairo, in the autumn of 1990, to press for the theatre festival the Ministry of Culture had cancelled on account of the war, insisted this year on holding their own "totally free" festival ?

# Hand in Hand*

## The Jadayel International Independent Arts Festival

For once, Egyptian artists have had the chance to experience the existence of the European Union as a concrete reality. On the initiative of an ambitious and highly motivated young theatre artist – writer, actress and director Nora Amin – four foreign cultural bodies in Cairo – the ProHelvetia Arts Council of Switzerland, the Royal Netherlands Cultural Fund, the British Council and the Goethe Institute – were persuaded to work hand in hand with independent artists and theatre groups in Egypt to build a solid bridge of cultural interaction and collaboration – a bridge that no war planes can bomb and no army can blow up, as Odin theatre actress Julia Varley is fond of saying.

As Nora describes it in the elegant brochure, this first international independent arts festival "is the fruit of the collaboration between these partners ... and many other organizations and venues (including the Town House and El-Mashrabiyya Galleries, the Roberto Cimetta Fund for the mobility of artists around the Mediterranean, the Egyptian Cultural development Fund, and the AUC Performance and Visual Arts Department) which still – in these difficult times – believe in independent art, in dialogue and exchange and in promoting change, not only in a local context but in an international networking context as well, attempting to create a complex tie of differences and similarities and of mutual explorations, investigations and development". Hence the title *Jadayel*, meaning braids.

* 6 November 2002.

The idea of *Jadayel*, as well as the title of its first session, "Sheharazade Now," were both inspired by yet another intercultural project, also sponsored by ProHelvetia. It all started when Swiss director Peter Braschler – who has worked for years with Palestinian theatre artists and writers and whose *Misk El-Ghazal* (Deer Musk), a stage-version of Hanan El-Sheik's famous novel of the same name, with an all-female Palestinian cast, visited Cairo while on tour a few years ago – began with his Maralam Theatre troupe to explore human relationships between individuals from different cultures. Love, being the most intimate of these, soon became the focus while the frame-story of *The Arabian Nights*, with its love, betrayal and murder themes and fascinating characters, familiar in both the East and West, provided a ready locus.

Maysoon Mahfouz, programme manager of the ProHelvetia liaison office in Cairo, takes up the story. Braschler and his team, including German writer Melanie Sandra Rose who, except for the Arabic portions, did the final script, "worked for six months in Cairo and Switzerland investigating the art of storytelling and what Sheharazade represents for the two cultures until the plot of *Sheharazade Now* was built up. When the production was ready, the director wanted to play it in a suitable context. He "suggested organizing other events related to Sheharazade and focusing on the daily attempts of women to survive. We started to look for who, where and how," Maysoon continues; it was then that Nora Amin appeared on the scene, saw the opportunity and immediately seized it. At once, she "initiated the idea of establishing a whole festival under the supervision of ProHelvetia and around the theme of Sheharazade ... We decided to involve other partners and Nora coordinated all the events in the festival."

It was a stupendous task and a big responsibility which needed experience, previous training in arts management, a degree of emotional detachment, a cool, calculating mind and, most of all, dependable trained assistants – none of which Nora had. But, despite the recent nightmarish experience she shared with other independent theatre groups early this year when (with modest financial help from ProHelvetia and some private donors) they staged a mini independent theatre festival (their 5th in 12 years) at the Russian cultural centre (which charged an enormous rent) and the many horrendous obstacles which nearly gave its organizer, Hani El-Mettenawi of the Sharpnel group, a nervous breakdown, Nora was not daunted; she embraced the task bravely, indeed, jubilantly, like an impossible dream come true.

For her, *Jadayel* did not only mean the continuity and development of the independent theatre movement she has been an active part of since its launching in 1990; it was also a vindication of the very idea of freedom, of the cause of independent art she so fervently champions. That is why she cast her net wide, hoping to rope in as many independent artists as possible – musicians, dancers, painters, film-makers and writers as well as theatre people; and she managed to net a decent catch and would have done much better if the whole thing hadn't happened at such a short notice.

Independence was also the reason behind her long, obstinate resistance to the idea of asking the government for anything. At last, however, she was forced by financial and artistic considerations to swallow her pride and apply to the cultural development fund for the use of two spaces – Beit El-Harrawi and Zeinab Khatoun. She got them for a fee of LE 5000, but with no sound or lighting systems. These,

and other technical requirements, were provided by The Royal Netherlands Cultural Fund and The Temple independent theatre company by courtesy of its founder Ahmad El-Attar. Except for one Egyptian show, *Full Stop, End of Line*, staged at the new Garage Space of the Town House Gallery, all the live performances in the festival, including its central production, the Swiss *Sheharazade Now*, were hosted at these two beautiful historical houses. But lovely as they are, it was often jokingly said that they were the only 'un-independent' smear on the otherwise thoroughly shampooed and well-groomed independent 'jadayel' of the festival.

Of the fifteen or so independent groups which form the hard core of the independent theatre movement in Egypt, eight took part, not counting in Manal Ibrahim's El-Taweza troupe (The Amulet) which, though listed in the catalogue, withdrew its *Gamila* at the last minute. Effat Yehya's Caravan group contributed a double bill which opened at the French Cultural Centre last year and I reviewed at the time.* *The Diary of Fatma*, a hilarious, quasi-realistic comedy with some sombre, reflective moments, features a day in the life of a harassed school teacher of slender means, with a bunch of demanding kids and a thoroughly uncooperative husband, who is near her wits' end trying to cope with no help from anybody. By contrast, the woman in *Memory of Rhythms*, which dramatizes the power-struggle between men and women as a symbolic ritual, is much more forceful and comes out on top at the end.

Azza El-Husseini's Al-Ghagar troupe (The Gypsies), a new-comer to the movement (it was founded less than 2 years ago), opts for a

* See the section on Effat Yehya in Part II.

different age group in *An Ordinary Girl* and portrays the longings and frustrations of a single, young Egyptian working woman. Seen with *Fatma's Diary*, it forms a very bleak image indeed of the lives of Egyptian women, both in youth and middle age and whether celibate or married. And as if that was not enough, director Saleh Sa'd's Al-Soradek, one of the earliest independent theatre groups, dating back to the late 1980s, relinquished on this occasion its typical style of broad, uproarious folk-comedy in favour of a depressing one-woman show featuring another long-suffering Fatma.

In *The Monologue of Fatma, the Egyptian*, the heroine is an actress who when saddled with the role of the Egyptian Fatma can find no better correlative for it than the image of the patient, faithful Penelope of Greek mythology. Like her, the actress sits on the shore, weaving and endlessly reciting the dull routine of Fatma's inane life while she waits for the absent male and fends off the advances of unwelcome suitors. Gradually, however, the actress's own personal thoughts and memories of her repeated frustrations – as a woman, a lover, an actress and a former hunted political activist – begin to intrude into the fictional character's monologue, forming a parallel, ironical variation. But was that the end of Fatma? By no means. The Theatre Atelier's *Batta and the Capricorn* sprang yet another upon us. Batta (the usual pet name for Fatma), who has lost her virginity for a cup of coffee and sacrificed her most cherished dreams to save her pride, finally comes to the conclusion that, in certain situations, most men have the hearts of chicken or rabbits and that, unfortunately, it is always the women who pay for it.

After all those lonely, suffering Fatmas, one is bound to feel grateful for *Goha, Spouse and Partners* by Abeer Ali's Al-Misaharati Workshop. An open, loud and vigorous feminist piece, originally commissioned by The New Woman NGO to tour the provinces, universities and poor urban areas addressing a wide variety of audiences, it uses glove-puppets, the popular comic stereotypes and slapstick routines of traditional puppet shows as well as the character of the legendary sharp-tongued, quick-witted Goha to incite women in the most entertaining way to stand up for their political, social and economic rights.

Though somewhat chillingly restrained, *Passages*, the contribution to the festival of Karima Mansour's Maat for Contemporary Dance, as well as her "open rehearsal" of improvisations on different moods and situations, struck a more sophisticated and refined note. The same emotional reserve and technical polish characterized Nora Amin's *La Musica 2eme*, based on Marguerite Duras's play of the same name.

Nora is a passionate admirer of Duras and has been haunted by this play for years. One of the reasons she founded her own troupe three years ago after working with other independent groups (mainly as an actress and less often as writer or director) for many years was perhaps to stage this text. She named her group after the play – La Musica – and set about preparing for her long-cherished production. It took her three years and six other productions before she was able to finally stage it. "During that time", she says, "the characters have grown, my interpretation changed. The Durassien text is now a 'pretext' to show my own interpretation of the crisis and fantasy of that desperate

couple." In her present production, she confesses, "the language, the succession of scenes, the going back and forth in time, the spoken and the unspoken, and the whole structure changed." Ironically, it is this intense personal involvement with the text which at once accounts for the strength of the production and its weaknesses. It seems to me that Nora has become so wrapped up in the text, so imprisoned in it that she cannot reach out to the audience to communicate the experience. She needs the eye of a director to make sure that what she seeks to communicate reaches the audience in a language they can read and understand.

Compared to *La Musica 2eme*, *Full Stop, End of Line* by The Obliged People Theatre Group (have you ever heard a more off-putting name) seemed painfully formless, unfocussed, banal and self-indulgent. Most of the actors had real talent, good body control and plenty of zest and there were fleeting moments when one seemed to glimpse a good potential for comic invention and wit; but the show seemed to have been hastily thought up and carelessly put together specifically for the festival – which might ironically explain the Group's odd choice of name. Most of the group originally belonged to Mohamed Shafiq's dance troupe which, two years ago, won the CIFET award for best performance with a modern movement and dance piece called *Where Things Happen.* With Shafiq away in Sweden to cultivate his prodigious talent as gifted dancer and choreographer and the troupe dismantled, one could understand how anxious those young performers were to use the festival as a launching pad for a new group; they felt it was now or never and they had to do it : hence *The Obliged.*

Foreign performances, other than the slightly disappointing and somewhat facile though visually intriguing *Sheharazade Now*, included *The Window*, a work in progress also directed by Braschler and acted by Tahani Salim about an expatriate Palestinian woman who goes back to Ramallah to find it under siege and relives the Palestinian long history of suffering and persecution as she watches through the shutters of her window Israeli soldiers rampaging through her city. *Stitches on the Concrete*, by Serbian artist Ana Vilenica, was another solo performance which tells the story of a mother without a husband, forced to work in a big factory with hundreds of other women in similar desperate situations and fighting for survival in the face of loneliness, penury and the callous indifference of the world.

But apart from live theatre, Jadayel had plenty of events and activities : a mini film-festival of work by some of the most talented young film-makers in Egypt today, hosted at the Goethe Institute; two art exhibitions : *Alf Leila wa Leila* by Hassan Al-Sharq, also at Goethe, and *Entr'acte : Sketches from Cairo* by Swiss artist Claudia Renne; two delightful evenings of storytelling by members of The Women and Memory Forum at the Garage of the Town House Gallery (a beautiful new versatile space and quite enormous), retelling old folk tales from a feminist perspective under the artistic direction of Caroline Khalil; an exciting lecture on Sheharazade and Resistance Strategies of the Dispossessed, delivered by Feryal Ghazouli, hosted by the AUC Institute For Gender and Women's Studies at the Falaki academic centre; a lecture-demonstration by the German director Alexander Stillmark at El-Mashrabiyya Gallery; an afternoon of storytelling by the German independent actor and storyteller Jorg Boesecke at the Town House Gallery; two Egyptian-Swiss sessions of public reading at the

Goethe Institute, featuring plays and other literary works related to the theme of the festival; a four-day movement and voice workshop for young independent actors donated to the festival by the international actress Julia Varley of the Odin theatre and hosted by Frank Bradley at the AUC Performance and Visual Arts Department; a ten-day dance workshop on the physical female image in different cultures, involving three dancers / choreographers : Karima Mansour from Egypt, Ana Vilenica, Serbia and Julietta Figueroa, Chile; and by way of a farewell gift on the last day of the festival (31st October, today in fact) a concert by Manal Mohey Eldin on the harp featuring works by Handel, Bach, Debussy and Tournier, among others.

So far, I have only spoken of the performances, functions and activities listed in the festival's catalogue; equally important, however, and perhaps more fruitful are the informal meetings and discussions before, in-between and after them, over tea and coffee in roadside, *baladi* cafes or drinks in the popular haunts of the downtown crowd. It is usually on such occasions that ideas are born, dreams exchanged, plans drawn, projects outlined and friendships launched. More than anything, it is for creating the occasion and the right atmosphere for such encounters that one is grateful to Nora. To have pulled off a festival of this kind is a credit to her stamina, dedication, perseverance and indefatigable energy. But to make of it the relaxed, joyful, friendly celebration it was needed talent, imagination and, above all, faith – all of which Nora has in plenty. With more time for preparation beforehand and some attention to quality control, *Jadayel* could easily become over the years the most popular and rewarding international arts festival in the Arab world.

**Hassan El-Gretly's**

***Al-Warsha***

**(est. 1987)**

# PART II

## *New Artists, New Troupes, New Directions*

# The Road to "Menya"*

Hassan El-Gretly is something of a maverick among contemporary Egyptian theatre directors. A paradoxical product of cross-cultural currents (a Scottish mother, an Egyptian father, Cretan ancestors, a French ex-wife, western education, a long sojourn in Europe, and an American passport to boot), he seems more a citizen of the world than a thoroughbred Egyptian; and yet, in *Tides of Night*, he has produced, perhaps, the most authentic piece of Egyptian theatre that can be found anywhere.

When El-Gretly decided in 1987 to opt out of mainstream theatre and set up on his own, there was no fringe tradition in Egypt; he was blazing a trail, and ten years on, there are at least ten recognized independent theatre troupes trying to follow in the footsteps of Al-Warsha and develop a kind of alternative theatre. Like Al-Warsha, they regard the established traditional theatrical institutions in Egypt, whether state-run or privately commercial, as stuffy, smug, prudish, timid, authoritarian, bureaucracy-ridden, too middle-class, and generally senile. Many of them frequently seek and often get the support of Al-Warsha in their interminable battles with the Censor and their ceaseless search for funds. It is not surprising, therefore, that nowadays many tend to regard Al-Warsha not simply as an artistic troupe, an odd or unique phenomenon on the current Egyptian theatrical scene, but, rather, as a political and artistic movement that embraces a wide variety of intellectual and artistic positions but generally stands for

* June 1993.

freedom, tolerance, and inter-cultural dialogue and opposes all forms of authoritarianism, jingoism, fanaticism and bigotry.

This should not be taken to mean that Al-Warsha and its disciples are politically vociferous; indeed, most of them have a horror of political slogans and regard most theories and ideologies with great suspicion. Their politics, if they are to be defined at all, have to be sought in their artistic methods, imaginative explorations, corporate mode of work, and their free and open mental attitude and way of life.

Over the years, and through a series of experiments in adapting foreign texts to the Egyptian vernacular, Al-Warsha has worked its way towards a kind of performance that is more of a communal theatrical event, closely in touch with the community at a grass-roots level : a kind of performance where you vividly experience the collapsing of all the barriers between the different sexes, nationalities, ethnic groups, social classes, as well as between performer and viewer. *Layali Al-Warsha* (evenings where the audience sit in a circle with the actors, often on the floor, to learn together popular and old folk songs, or listen to stories from the popular, oral narrative tradition, or watch glove-puppet sketches, shadow-plays or stick-duels) are not just rehearsals open to the public (as El-Gretly modestly describes them); they are true festive occasions with a distinct sense of community and carnivalesque air.

In developing this kind of performance, El-Gretly's reworking of Jarry's *Ubu* cycle of plays, with the Gweli brothers, over two years was of crucial importance; it brought them in touch with many indiginous popular theatrical forms, particularly the shadow-play, and began their long association with the few surviving masters of this art

form. Indeed, the resulting play (called *Dayer Maydour* in its first version, and *Dayeren Dayer* in the second) was a watershed for the group.

The next two years were spent researching folk literature and the oral narrative traditions and the result was *Tides of Night*. No easy showmanship here; no laboured chasing after theatrical effect; no decorative thrills and frills — only the illusive quality of life itself and its subtle rhythms of sound and silence, movement and stillness, presence and absence, shadow and light. From the masses of folk material they sifted through, El-Gretly and the Gweli brothers hit upon a narrative ballad (a "Mawwal") based on a real tragic love story between an itinerant folk-singer, called Hassan, and the beautiful daughter of a rich family of farmers in Upper Egypt — precisely in "Menya", a name that denotes both "death" and "destination" in Arabic.

In the hands of Al-Warsha, the story of the two star-crossed lovers splinters into many narratives and multiple points of view, and while the marginal characters are foregrounded and given voice, the two protagonists recede to the background and remain silent. They appear as figures enacting the different roles and interpretations given to them by the conflicting narrative voices. The effect of this artistic strategy is not simply to undermine the authority of the narrator who sings the original "Mawwal", but to subject all narratives, and the act of narration itself to a searching critique that reveals how it depends for its coherence and completion on speaking *for* the 'other', silencing his/her voice and supressing his/her point of view.

This treatment of the Mawwal has clear political implications in so far as it invites us to question the authority of all inherited narratives.

But it was originally inspired by an actual meeting between El-Gretly and the only sane, surviving witness of the real story, the hero's cousin and embittered rival. His narrative was riddled with equivocations, prevarications and self-contradictions, and in these El-Gretly found his key to the play.

Ultimately, *Tides of Night* is not about a love story, the Egyptian version of *Romeo and Juliet*, but about story-telling and, also, the insubstantiality and transience of what we call reality and could be, in fact, only a shadow-play.

# Confronting Bureaucracy and Censorships*

Ideological defiance and technical audacity sum up the spirit that informs the Egyptian independent shows playing either in the contest or on the fringe of the fifth CIFET. Both aspects were bound to arouse a degree of wariness in some quarters and a measure of downright opposition and antagonism in others. Partisan interests and inter-group rivalry made things even worse, producing a tangle of conflicting views. This confusion betrays the absence of a shared frame of reference, collectively approved criteria of evaluations or even a common language that allows for difference without the opponents necessarily coming to blows or resorting to libellous accusations. In normal circumstances, one wouldn't mind such skirmishes, however bellicose. They are one of the hazards of a reviewer's life. But in the atmosphere of a competition, imposing one's view becomes a question of life and death and the whole thing takes on the aspect of a power-struggle, generating a lot of ugliness and bitter animosity.

Last week, I optimistically, and rather naively, declared that the criterion of artistic excellence promises to prevail this year. By this criterion, Hassan El-Gretly's *Tides of Night* would be a clear winner. El-Gretly spent three years wading through heaps of folkloric material — folk tales, popular legends and rituals, ballads, you name it — and has come up with a veritable theatrical gem, unbeatable for its authenticity, emotional impact and technical polish. His intensive research took him up and down the valley and meant a lot of slumming

* September 1993.

in the lowest quarters of Egypt, chatting, recording and pumping the surviving wintnesses of old tales. One such witness was the cousin of a popular romantic here who, Romeo-like, died because he loved the wrong woman. The "Mawwal" of Hassan and Na'ima – the singer and the daughter of a rich land-owner – became the focus of EL-Gretly's research. Hassan's surviving cousin was given the status of ubiquitous and muddled narrator, and his remembrances of times past became, by virtue of their very dimness and inaccuracies, the vehicle of an existentially valid experience that rends the comforting shrouds of popular illusions – the heroic, pacifying "Mawwal" – and reveals, in all its naked agony, the realities of loneliness, savagery, betrayal and isolation. For once the authority of the inherited popular "Mawwal" as discourse was challenged by the counter narratives of two marginal characters – the rival cousin and the hero's betrayed fiancee whom he jilts when he falls in love with the heroine, Na'ima. In all my theatrical experience, I have never seen a four-poster brass-bed put to such eloquent poetic use. At once an altar and a funreal pyre, the womb of life and the site of ecstasy and loss, it dominated the tent-like stage design (truely inspired in its colours and lighting) and became an all-embracing metaphor for the Hamletian prison cell of life.

My first encounter with the show (at the British Council which graciously provided El-Gretly with rehearsal facilities) left me sufficiently impressed and moved. But that was noting compared to the impression it made on the audience when it was presented at Al-Hanager centre in a dress rehearsal. Everybody was practically bowled over. Unfortunately, however, the performance was not entered on the viewing lists of the various committees created by the ministry of culture to select the Egyptian runner in the Festival's contest. And

although at least five proficient and well-respected critics watched the show, none of them could find an official venue to nominate it. Ironically too, neither the minister of culture, an artist in his own right, nor Huda Wasfi, the directress of Al-Hanager centre, who both saw and admired *Ghazeer El-Leel* had any power to recommend it. The minister, like the proverbial person who cut off his nose to spite his own face, appointed a supreme committee to review the choices of all the many other sub-committees and, strangely, none of its five members, respectable as they are, had been seen near an Egyptian playhouse for years. Predictably, none of them had seen El-Gretly's little *chef d'oeuvre* and by the time they convened, three days before the Festival's opening ceremony, El-Gretly and his little group of magicians were off to Switzerland to open the Zurich theatre festival.

# Taken at the Flood*

There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat,
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our venture.

Who else but the Bard could have said those lines, and what better description can we find for "the affairs" of Hassan El-Gretly and his Al-Warsha crew of adventurous voyagers at the present juncture in their career ?!

Happily, those of us who watched Al-Warsha's latest venture, either at Al-Hanager Centre in September, or in the lovely garden of the British Council in October, came away with the firm belief that Al-Warsha was now definitely afloat, that it has taken the tide at the flood and the current when it served.

Like all great directors, such as Kantor or Peter Brook, El-Gretly is a thorough and restless explorer; for him, a production is a living, growing organism, capable of continuous expansion and transformation — never a "finished" product. It took him three years to tap all the possible resources of *Dayer*, the apex of the first phase of his creative career, and exhaust all its potential for growth. Once it reached completion, its fulness of existence, he instinctively knew it was time to bid farewell and set off on a new course.

* 14 October 1993.

It was a crucial point; so far he had worked on foreign texts — Dario Fo, Franca Rame Peter Handke, Harold Pinter, Kafka and, finally, Alfred Jarry's *Ubu* quartet. As a product of cross-cultural currents, El-Gretly needed that apprenticeship in the adaptation of modern classics to Egyptian tastes. It was like casting around for a compass to help him find his own cultural bearings after his long expatriate years. Ironically, or, rather, naturally, the more he rubbed shoulders with the Egyptian intelligentsia – predominantly middle-class – the more he felt alienated and ill at ease. His old and cherished faith in the potency of the Egyptian vernacular, openly declared and passionately defended on several occasions, stood him in good stead; it helped him to negotiate his way through the morass of the Egyptian cultural heritage and its many difficult tangles. With an English mother, an Egyptian father whose family name links him to the Island of Crete, a western education and a long sojourn in Europe, he obstinately remained an Egyptian through and through. His quest for authenticity took him to the old quarters of Cairo where he made himself at home, to the popular fairgrounds where he became a familiar figure and, eventually, to many towns and villages up and down the Nile.

This opening out and embracing of the Egyptian living heritage at the grass roots was essential in shaping the course of El-Gretly's future work. And, indeed, before the research that eventually yielded *Tides of Night*, the fruits of this intense cultural immersion were already palpable in *Dayer Dayer*, his adaptation of Jarry's *Ubu* plays. But exciting and visually thrilling as *Dayer* was, it betrayed no hints as to what was to follow.

What followed was a two-year break which El-Gretly and his crew invested in studying the oral folk traditions and the art of story- telling. The dividends were immense, both in terms of acting skills and artistic maturity. For those who followed the progress of Al-Warsha over the years, *Tides of Night* must seem like a stunning, gigantic leap forward.

The simple love story of a folk-singer and the beautiful daughter of a rich, land-owning family in Upper Egypt was consecrated by the popular imagination into a narrative ballad, a "Mawwal" – maybe because it ended tragically with the drowning or decapitation of the star-crossed Hassan. In this "Mawwal", El-Gretly found his focus — the point where he could pool the energies of his, by then, well-trained and versatile actors.

In his hands, however, the straight-forward "Hassan and Na'ima Mawwal" became a Shakespearean "baseless fabric", an "insubstantial pageant." It splintered into many fragments, each reflecting one side of the story. The result was a narrative of multiple perspectives and contrapuntal tonalities. As the voices met and separated, echoed, intersected and undercut each other, the story paled out and fell apart leaving only a deep scar behind. The truth can never be found out; what really happened and what those people were really like remains a teasing mystery. Yet, we feel that we know them intimately, as if they were a personal memory of some distant lived experience.

El-Gretly sets his "Mawwal" in an old, dusty-looking marquee, with the once bright colours all faded. Its patchy look (it was made out of cast-off scraps of old Marquees) parodies the structure of the play and sets the tone for the evening. As you step inside the tent and take

your place in a semi-circle round the performing area, you experience a warm sense of intimacy; and the festive atmosphere is bolstered by the live band of folk musicians, with their traditional wind and percussion instruments, and the last extant troupe of shadow-puppet players.

The show begins. The spirit of the legendary folk-singer, Hassan, is invoked by a fellow folk-singer chanting bits of the "Mawwal". He recites a moving synopsis of Hassan's history, standing on an ancient, brass and wood four-poster bed which serves, momentarily, as a raised platform — a stage.

His emotional version of the story, however, is immediately and laconically countered. Mus'ad, Hassan's cousin and his embittered rival both in singing and the love of Na'ima (played by Sayed Ragab), standing on the same platform, sardonically dismisses the story as pure, fictional tripe. A conflict immediately erupts between heroism and banality, romance and mundane commonsense.

In reality (and the show), this Mus'ad is the only sane, surviving witness of the real story which gave birth to the Mawwal. El-Gretly was sufficiently lucky to catch him alive and had extensive recording sessions with him. The story, as he told it, was riddled with self-contradictions. Those Freudian slips and tricks of memory must have vexed Hassan – not the singer, but El-Gretly. But where else but in ambiguity can we find the springs of poetry ?!

Mus'ad, an insignificant, marginal bystander, was given the role of narrator, among many voices, and his confused narrative inspired the shape of the play and informed its texture. It felt like turning the "Mawwal" inside out, or standing it on its head. In the following scene, having cryptically and cynically shattered the legend, Mus'ad introduces

another marginal character — Galila, Hassan's betrothed, whom he left for Na'ima. Half-crazed, she haunts his grave – the four-poster bed now swathed in green and looking like the shrine of a saint – and whirls round in mystical swirls. A prisoner herself, trapped in her room by tradition, she would have loved to imprison the fugitive Hassan with her, behind the rusty iron bars of her cell. The scene ends with a clue that explains Mus'ad's attitude and transforms him from an unwilling narrator into an important agent in the unfolding story.

The transformation is punctuated by a short farcical interlude featuring three shadow-puppet players preparing for a performance. When the screen is finally set up, after some knockabout routines, it displays a supine puppet representing the body of a dead man. The lights dim out for a second and when they come up again we discover, with something of a shock, that the dead shadow-puppet has materialized into a real corpse stretched out on the bare four-poster bed. It feels like a conjuring trick and completely dismantles the dividing barriers between fiction and reality, the world of shadows and our corporeal existence.

Still reeling, we are given yet another mystery to ponder. Whose corpse is it ? As if to vex us still, Mus'ad introduces another marginal character and foregrounds it; an Armenian expatriate woman, who owns a tobacco shop and who, like Galila, has lost her nearest and dearest, and views the world from behind the rusty bars of her small-shop window.

In this play, windows, small and barred, or big and wide, form an important recurrent motif. Together with the many clusters of water- and fire-related images, they help us thread our way through the

splinters in this veritable hall of (smashed ?) mirrors. At the end, when Mus'ad declares perfunctorily that Galila has become completely paralyzed, with nothing moving in her except her eyes, the window motif reaches its metaphoric climax and hits you like a stab through the heart.

The play proceeds, with Mus'ad consistently contradicting himself or going off at a tangent, only to be pushed back in line by Zein Mahmoud, the wonderful folk singer, or edged sideways by the intense presence of Hassan (on and off the white shadow play screen which finally becomes his shroud) or the monologues of the other surviving witnesses.

By the time we reach the final sequence, which includes a magnificent cock-fight, in the form of a "Tahteeb" or stick-dance (a kind of rhythmical fencing match with sticks) where the past is recreated and Mus'ad is split into a dancer (Medhat Fawzi) and a narrator (Sayed Ragab), and which also includes a wailing and keening scene (superbly conducted by Hanan Yusef, Vanya Exerjian and Madiha El-Sayed) plus a moving recitation from the Bible in a wedding-cum-funereal scene with the whole stage draped in white tulle — by the time we reach this final sequence, we feel as if the whole fabric of what we call, for convenience and for lack of a better word "reality" has thinned out and become dangerously unstable.

It took me a long time and five viewings of the show to discover how it works. Every time I watched it, I was literally engulfed and went away thoroughly confused, yet immensely satisfied. Then suddenly one night it dawned upon me that the mystery was in the story-telling !

Old stories, when repeated orally, have a habit of changing their skin and acquiring new perspectives with every new narrator. The bare outlines remain, but the details and the significance change. Marginal characters can assume heroic proportions, depending on the narrator, and the most insignificant details can be made to seem important. And this is what I think El-Gretly has done. He let himself be guided by the rhythms and tonal modulations of traditional oral story-telling with all its shifting moods and colours and all the prejudices of the different narrators. The result was a work at once authentic and original and startlingly postmodernist in its deconstructivist bent.

## Bounded in a Nutshell*

It is amazing how many people can be packed into a small space if the spirit is willing – and spirit is the key word here. The small hall at the British Council where Hassan El-Gretly has chosen to hold his Ramadan feast of popular songs, ballads and stories – with the added treat of a shadow-play – is, indeed, very small, measuring approximately 8 by 6 metres; and yet, one night last week, it magically seemed to expand and hold twice its full capacity. People were everywhere – on the chairs, squeezed up against the walls, squatting and crouching, knee to knee, on the floor. There was literally no passageway anywhere. Even the little corridor outside was packed and I considered myself lucky when I found a small squatting space in the door way – even though I had to crane my neck half the time to get a view of the performers.

At one end of the room, against the black sheets which curtained off a small area of it to serve as the booth of the shadow-players, El-Gretly stood, like an old master of revels, beaming benignly on the sea of humanity around him. I imagined I could see, floating above his head, an invisible banner sporting in big letters Hamlet's words : "I could be bounded in a mutshell and count myself a king of infinite space." And, indeed, if Blake could see the world in a grain of sand, why not in a nutshell.

In fact, the image of the world in a nutshell provides the theme for one of the folk tales selected from the company's vast stock to be

* 23 February 1995.

narrated by the actors in rotation (two a night) in the story-time slot of the programme. In that tale, which like many others comes from the governorate of Daqahliyah, a dervish sits at the gate of a mosque cracking his whip and declaiming that God can create the world in a nutshell. A skeptical man, entering the mosque, shows disbelief; whereupon, as soon as he takes off his clothes and steps into the washing basin to perform his ablutions, he finds himself turned into a naked woman standing on a river bank. A passing man gives her (him?) refuge in his home and marries her when his wife dies. The marriage produces two boys and a girl. Then one day, she goes to the river to do her laundry and decides to wash herself as well. As soon as she takes off her clothes and steps into the water, lo and behold, she is a man again, standing in the washing-basin of the mosque. On his way out, the restored man apologizes to the dervish for his former skepticism. The dervish retorts : "Go your ways. It took you three pregnancies to believe me."

Was it the idea of God as a grand illusionist, both in the philosophical and artistic senses, as a creator of walking shadows and poor players, which attracted Al-Warsha group to this story ? It links eerily with the epilogue delivered nightly by the veteran puppeteer Hassan Khannoufa at the end of the episodes shown from the shadow-play. In it, he mentions God and the shadow-player almost in the same breath. Moreover, in one of their hand-out sheets, entitled "Khayal" (in Arabic, both shadow and imagination), Al-Warsha group explain their attraction to this art-form which has become for them symbolic of the creative powers of the artistic imagination, then draw our attention to the persistent belief among Egyptian shadow-players, past and present, that the power they exercise over their puppets is an

illustration of the power of God over his creation. In this sense, the shadow-play becomes not only a metaphor for human life, its insubstantiality and transience, but also a form of worship, constantly reminding the spectator of the omnipotence of the Lord.

The omnipotence of the Lord, however, was not paramount in my mind as I watched on four successive nights episodes from the serialized shadow-*Play of the Crocodile*. What engrossed me was that the puppets were manipulated, and quite skillfully too, by the young Al-Warsha actors under the supervision of the old masters, the last surviving ones, Hassan Khannoufa, Ahmad El-Komi and Hassan El-Farran. What better proof of passion for *El-Khayal* and of dedication to this art form than to train new generations of players to guard against its demise? Nor is the passion contained within the group; it has spilled over among school children many of whom are currently being coached into the art by the masters and their apprentices. Invariably, however, at the end of the *Crocodile* episodes, which wind up the first part of the programme, before the interval, I would find my mind reverting to the question of Divine/human creativity and pondering it, not philosophically, but as an idea that seems to provide the first part of the programme with a general frame-work, and a degree of unity and coherence. Is it my imagination, or do I really discern a pattern where the assertion of the infinite freedom of God's creative powers in the opening song (a hilarious duet from the repertoire of the Port-Said Tamboura folk-music band, delightfully performed by Midhat Fawzi and Sayed El-Rumi) is first counterpointed by a celebration of human creativity – as it manifests itself in the performers' art – in the items that follow, then reconciled with it in a harmonious synthesis at the end of the shadow-play episodes in Khannoufa's epilogue? Was this by

accident or design? Possibly, it was simply good, old artistic intuition. In any case, the items in the first part of the programme — the warming up songs the actors invite us to learn with them, since they are new to them as well, the story-telling excersises which formed an essential part of the actors' training for *Tides of Night*, the *Hassan and Na'ima Mawwal* which was the material out of which grew the *Tides*, the *Play of the Crocodile* which is still in the stages of preparation and rehearsal — are delicately arranged and strike one as having form. But apart from this, they give us a valuable insight into El-Gretly's working methods and actor-training techniques.

In this respect, I think that "having fun" is a guiding principle; "sharing together" is another, and "discovering what is there rather than seeking what isn't" is a third. El-Gretly also believes in learning by doing and through close contact with the masters; at one point in the rehearsals, he thinks the actors need the presence of an audience other than the director; hence the story-telling sessions at the Mashrabiyya gallery during the rehearsals of *Tides* and the current open rehearsals of the *Crocodile*. This controlled public exposure during rehearsals helps the actors discover their mistakes without undermining their self-confidence; it also saves the relationship of actor and director many a bruise. Not that El-Gretly looks capable of bruising anybody. Indeed, I have never seen an Egyptian director who gives fewer orders and instructions to his actors or takes more pleasure in their work than him. Not for him the frenzied voice, the tense muscles, the jerky gait, the haughty air, or that hungry look in the eyes which makes some directors look like desperate hounds stalking some fugitive prey. He looks, outwardly at least, totally relaxed, thoroughly enjoying himself,

at home with his actors and at peace with the world. No wonder his actors look happy too.

Unlike many experimental artists who actively search for new forms all the time, El-Gretly opts for a philosophy of creative receptivity involving unconditional surrender to experience. He summed up this philosophy in an interview once when he said : "Je ne cherche pas, je trouve." And in order to "find", one has to embrace the world unconditionally, for only then will it yield its secrets. The same philosophy informs his relationship with his actors and with the popular cultural heritage.

This becomes obvious in the second part of the programme which hosts from Upper Egypt the great folk-singer and inimitable *Sira* bard, Sayed El-Dawwy, to recite and sing to the tunes of his *rebab* selections from *The Book of Orphans* — the final part of the saga of Beni-Hilal, known as *El-Sira El-Hilaliya* — accompanied by three members of Al-Warsha : Zein Mahmoud and Midhat Fawzi as chorus and the lively Gamal Mis'ad on the *darabukka* (Egyptian drum). But before they start, El-Gretly speaks to the audience, which includes now all the members of the company. He confesses that they went to the *Sira* at first thinking there might be a play in it. But after a year of listening and recording and regular contact with El-Dawwy, they didn't find a play. Now they are cultivating their knowledge of it partly for pure pleasure, partly to learn from the art of the master through direct experience and personal contact (as they did and still do with the masters of the shadow-theatre) and partly to record the neglected bits of the *Sira* before the waters of oblivion close upon them. Then he withdraws to sit among his actors and crew, usually on the floor, and settles down to enjoy himself.

For the next hour, you forget everything except El-Dawwy – his rich, loamy voice and earthy language, his overpowering theatrical presence, his magnificant stature, his infectious humour, the stunning tempo changes and vocal modulations, the eloquent gestures, the serene dignity of his carriage, the sculptured, dark head, like an ancient Egyptian statue. Even the gold tooth that shines between the dark lips is fascinating. But there is also the natural charisma of the man, his geniality, charm and warmth. You listen entranced, not to the story, but to the story-teller : the story becomes a vehicle for his art. Al-Warsha group may not have found a play in the *Hilaliya Sira*, but they have certainly found a limitless source of inspiration in El-Dawwy and, luckily, they know it.

Going to the British Council night after night for more songs, stories, episodes of the *Crocodile* and the *Sira*, it struck me as somewhat ironical that the only place in Cairo where you can have a genuinely Egyptian theatrical experience and authentic popular art right now is foreign territory.

## Taming Abu Zeid*

When Hassan El-Gretly announced in 1994, in the wake of the great success of Al-Warsha's stunning and haunting *Tides of Night*, that his next project was to plough through *El-Sira El-Hillaliyya* (the popular epic of the tribe of Beni-Hilal) in the hope of making a play out of it, many thought, with good reason, that he had gone off his rocker and turned suicidal. *El-Sira El-Hillaliyya* may be the *Iliad* of the Arabs, as Abdel-Rahman El-Abnoudi, the poet who collected and published one version of it, likes to call it, and is possibly the most popular and widely sung of all the folk epics that have come down to us, including the famous *Sira of Antara Ibn Shaddad*, but, when it comes to dramatisation, it is certainly the stuff that nighmares are made of. Not only is it inordinately massive and voluminous (it falls in 5 books with a total of one million lines), its tangled web of events, characters and stories spans places as far-flung as the desert plateau of Nejd, in the Arabian Peninsula (the home of the tribe) in the East, through Egypt, to Tunisia in the West, and follows the fortunes of the tribe over three generations. No wonder dramatists have shied away from it, in contrast to the other great popular epic *Antara*.

Named after its protagonist (the black desert hero and invincible warrior who, born to the chief of his tribe by an Ethiopian slave, spent his life fighting to throw off the stigma of slavery and get his father to acknowledge him as a legitimate son so that he could marry his beautiful cousin Abla), *Antara* has received at least six dramatisations — starting with Ahmed Shawqi's classical verse drama, *Antara*, in the

* 5 February 1998.

nineteen twenties, and ending with Yusri El-Gindi's Brechtian re-interpretation of the epic and debunking of the traditional heroic ethic in his political parable *Antara*, presented at El-Tali'a theatre in 1977 in a memorable production by Samir El-Asfouri.

The epic of Beni-Helal, though its hero, Abu Zeid, like Antara, is equally swarthy, rejected by his father at birth, and has initially to fight for recognition with his sword, boasts only one dramatic treatment, *El-Hillaliyya*, again by Yusri El-Gindi, first presented as *Abu Zid El-Hilali* at El-Tali'a, in a production by El-Asfouri in 1978, then, seven years later, as *Sirat Beni Hilal*, at Wikalat El-Ghouri with Abdel-Rahman El-Shafi this time in the director's seat.

If Hassan El-Gretly had been your run-of-the-mill director, or the kind of artist who starts off with a definite idea as to what he wants to say, I would not have worried and it would not have taken him so long to produce a play out of this epic. In the case of Yusri El-Gindi, the unwieldy, digressive and complicated nature of the narrative posed no problem; he came to it, as he had done in the case of the *Antara* epic, with a clear-cut idea about the message he wanted it to put across : that heroic, visionary leaders and so-called saviours can do untold damage to their own people as well as bring ruin upon others. He also had a ready-made form and knew exactly the shape it should take on stage. Armed with Brecht's *verfremdung*, or 'Alienation-effect' theory, and the techniques the German poet and director developed to put it into effect and turn the spectators into emotionally detached observers, El-Gindi openly pursued a didactic course. Rather than plunge into the narrative's boggy marshes and treacherous quick-sands in the hope of discovering its matrix and sources of energy, he put it at arm's length,

firmly consigning it to the past. The play starts long after the heroes of Beni-Hilal have liquidated each other and all been dispatched to either heaven or hell (both locations are to be clearly marked on the stage in bold letters according to the stage directions). A chorus of commentators from the present, armed with various masks and a good supply of sarcastic jokes and mocking squibs, adds another barrier, further fencing off the dead protagonists and almost reducing them to dead matter that can be newly shaped to serve the author's purposes. The job of this chorus, apart from caricaturing several of the epic's characters, and maddeningly disrupting whatever emotion or coherent action that seems to form, is to conjure up the dead heroes in order to enact the bits of the epic that best illustrate El-Gindi's point. It was a clear case of projecting a particular reading of the present onto a fictional past and of manipulating the epic in a partisan, reductive manner to offer a critique of both the Arabs' past and present. And in the fiercely didactic drive of the play, the epic got run over and its characters were squashed into flat, bloodless ideas and ideological counters.

A poet of the theatre and never an ideologue, El-Gretly approached *El-Sira El-Hillaliyya* (trembling, one would imagine) with no definite plans or preconceived ideas. Awed and fascinated by the scope and magnitude of the epic, he humbly opted for the rigorously exacting and perilously insecure (but ultimately more rewarding) course of total, unconditional self-surrender and unselfish immersion to the point of almost complete self-negation. Like a wise explorer leading a brave crew on a dangerous expedition into a strange continent of "infinite deserts", in search of a hidden treasure somewhere, which may or may not exist, and cognizant of all the perils, he spent years carefully

preparing for the adventure, training his crew in all the necessary skills for survival, ferreting out whatever relevant material exists, finding the right guides among the old bards and, above all, listening to them and training himself to be guided by them — for it is "the bard alone", as one of Al-Warsha's flyers says, "that can tread unerring" and find his way through the shifting sands and labyrinthian deserts of the epic's stories.

The survival skills the travellers had to learn included such traditional performance arts as story-telling, stick-fighting, dervish dancing, *ghawazi* dance, *mawwal* singing and religious chanting and playing old, traditional wind, string and percussion instruments like the *mizmar*, the *arghoul*, the *rababa* and the *darabukka*. The research side, which started in 1994, consisted in collecting the oral tradition of *El-Sira El-Hillaliyya* from its last great bards; and the immersion stage, which involved the whole group, entailed learning by heart vast stretches of the epic, training to recite and sing them, absorbing the old rhythms, colloquial poetic diction, melodic intonation and voice inflection and testing their competence in public, over and over, in the open-rehearsal sessions called *Layaly Al-Warsha* (Al-Warsha Nights).

Out of this continuous, close, daily contact with the narrative (a kind of contact which El-Gretly insisted should not be rigidly guided, planned or conceptualised, but remain always free and spontaneous, subject only to the performer's intimate, personal interaction and intense, existential engagement with the epic), something began to grow — hesitantly, shyly, almost imperceptibly; something half-glimpsed, half-formed, half-understood and enveloped in a haze of exciting possibilities. The graceful, white tent, designed by Tarek Abul-Futuh

(Al-Warsha's scenographer and set and costume designer) and pitched in the garden of the British Council in Agouza, among the trees, looked like some mythical, monolithic white bird, perching momentarily there for rest and soon to continue its flight across the vast continuum of time and the great divides between peoples, places and cultures. It was solidly real — the poles and ropes holding it up and all the lighting equipment were clearly visible; all the same, it had about it an air of unreality, the painful feel of fragility and transience. One could imagine it suddenly flapping its wings, taking off and disappearing into the night sky.

Stepping inside it from the garden, the feel of the ground under one's feet suddenly changed, sending a tremor up the spine. You were treading on sand, a thick, rich layer of it that gave way under your feet and made you feel as if you were sinking into it. The tiered wooden blocks on either side where the audience sat looked like two small rocky islands jutting out of a sea of sand and bracketing an oval pool between them. The performers (beautifully, though somberly costumed by Abul-Futuh in a subtly connotative variety of Upper Egyptian dress) sat on the ground along the base of the two graded wooden brackets while the old masters occupied the side of the lowest tier next to the entrance. The music struck up, the singing began — rhythmically lulling and swaying at first, then briskly trotting and finally rushing at galloping speed. The performers, singly, in twos, threes and fours, or en masse, alternately stood up, stepped into the oval performance space between the tiered, wooden brackets (which fanned out at both ends to create two further, smaller performance spaces) and strove to slow down the rapid flow of the narrative, capture some of its fleeting significant moments and momentarily fix them and body them forth in the present through

movement, voice and gesture. In those scenes, narration and representation were so inextricably intertwined that you could not tell where the one began and the other ended. The thoughts of a character seething with anger, burning with uncertainty, suffering great injustice, experiencing a terrible sense of loss and bereavement, or desperately scouring the desert in search of a long-missing prince (usually expressed in broken monologues, cryptic statements, half-sentences and exclamations) are accompanied and complemented by a stream of narrative, explication and commentary provided in song by the rest of the group.

As the performance progressed, images, vague and stirring, seemed to float up out of the sand, like distant pre-natal recollections, then fade away. Interspersed with bouts of furious joy and primitive sensual energy, expressed in dance and song, the significant spots of time, culled from the rambling, tortuous narrative, merged and separated, counterpointing images of love and hatred, revenge and remorse, submission and defiance, fear and anticipation, separation and reunion, conflict and reconciliation, solitary and communal existence and light and darkness — all the significant themes and moments that make up human existence. Such moments were not offered as a self-contained dramatic sequence, sufficient unto itself, but were deliberately made to look, feel and sound like shiny crystal bubbles that form out of the tensions of the narrative, the clash of its waves and recurrent cycles, and float up dazzlingly only to burst a moment later.

The transience, uncertainty and basic theatricality of the pageant we call life or history were forcefully brought home to the audience twice in the course of the performance : the first time was when, at one side of

the tent, the two wings suddenly collapsed, revealing the outside world (the trees and blocks around the British Council, with a small bit of night sky), then, together with the limply dangling centre-piece, heaved up higher than their former level to reveal a very high platform representing the inner quarters (and self) of Khadra El-Sharifa — Abu-Zeid El-Hilali's shamefully wronged mother and the only person in possession of the secret that can stop the prospective bloodshed and prevent the terrible crime of patricide. The second time was when the two sides of the tent behind the audience seemed to swell, drop lower, then slowly edge towards each other during the stick-fighting duel between Abu-Zeid and his father. It seems that the heavens, in the make-believe world of Al-Warsha's *Spinning Lives* and inside their tent, are less indifferent to the fate of humanity than the real heavens, or those of Sophocles or Aeschylus. None of the glowering, grim and inimical skies of Greek tragedy here and none of its vengeful gods — however much the theatrical mode of Al-Warsha's *Spinning Lives* may be indebted to it. Indeed, I couldn't help thinking sometime during the show how closely it seemed to rub shoulders with Greek tragedy and how much it resembled it in its treatment of its sources, its fierce, primitive passions, rugged beauty and rough, unpolished nobility.

Like life, *Spinning Lives* is a teasing, enchanting paradox : it is openly and undisguisedly theatrical and yet deeply and disturbingly real; it is full of art and artifice, yet totally honest and unpretentious. Whatever claims it makes to the truth of its reading of the Hillaliyya epic are severely qualified and proposed in a tentative, provisional manner which implicitly acknowledges that no one interpretation of any

phenomenon, artistic or real, can encompass and exhaust all of its meaning. What we get in *Spinning Lives* is not a, or the, truth, but the shape, form and feel of the experience of the truth — any truth : fleeting glimpses of an evanescent vision, composed of flitting patches of light and shadow, momentarily framed by a fictional tent above and a make-believe desert beneath.

**Mahmoud Abu Doma's**

***Alternative Theatre in Alexandria***

(est. 1990)

# Playing With Fire*

Theatrical events are few and far between in Alexandria. In winter, it is forced into theatrical hibernation and in summer, it is doomed to parasitical dependence on guest Cairene troupes to entertain its visitors. The city which has given the Egyptian theatre Salama Hijazi, Sayed Darwish and Fatma Rushdi, and was a thriving theatrical centre at the turn of the century, with at least six private companies working round the year, has been shamefully neglected for decades and, at present, does not have a single resident professional theatre company.

When Sami Khashaba took over as head of the State Theatre Organisation four years ago he announced that giving Alexandria its own national theatre was at the top of his agenda. So far, however, the company has not materialized and its prospective home, Sayed Darwish theatre, remains in need of extensive restoration. Work has already begun, but at the rate it is going, everyone tells me, it may take up to ten years before the building is ready. Another thing that galls Alexandrians is the appointment of a Cairene director as head of the proposed company in blatant disregard of many competent, experienced, and highly qualified local artists.

One such artist is playwright and director Mahmoud Abu Doma who, against great odds, has managed to keep his independent, largely self-financing and non-profit-making Alernative Theatre Group going for the past ten years. Their first production, Doma's *Castaways* – a haunting poetic parable about the rise of capitalism and consumerism, based on the Biblical story of the Fall and set in an idyllic island

* 8 April 1999.

suggesting the Garden of Eden – was performed in the garden of the Alexandria Atelier in the winter of 1989 with real trees and, on two nights, a real drizzle. Next was *The Dance of the Scorpions* – a brilliant and highly theatrical adaptation of *Hamlet* which narrows it down to a single plane, the political, and projects it (with the help of masks, puppets, elaborate costumes and life-size paper dolls) as a gruesome *bal masqué*. It was first performed in 1990, at the open air theatre of the Opera House during the first Free Theatre Festival, then, in a slightly modified version in which Ophelia's ghost plays the role of chorus, at El-Shatbi Arts Centre in 1992.

In subsequent years, though he continued writing, producing two more plays, *The Well* and *Miriam*, Doma turned his attention as director and group manager to foreign texts. It does not take a lot of guessing to figure out the reason. New plays by relatively unknown authors are invariably regarded with great suspicion by those who possess the money and the venues. With a famous foreign play it is easier to get some kind of subsidy and a performance space from the local authorities. And if all else fails, one can always appeal to the cultural centre of the play's country of origin. It was with help from the American Cultural Centre that Doma and his group were able to mount a production of Edward Albee's *Who Is Afraid of Virginia Woolf* at El-Shatbi Arts Centre in 1990, while Doma's beautiful translation of Athol Fugard's *A Place with the Pigs* was readily sponsored by the Cultural Palaces Organisation and presented at the same venue in 1992.

A grant from the Goethe Institute allowed him to spend some time in Germany, attending performances and visiting important theatre centres. There, his passion for Brecht — the poet rather than the pedagogue –– which permeates in vaying degrees most of his writing

and has from the beginning substantially defined his approach to theatre as both dramaturge and director gained new force. Not surprisingly, the Alternative Theatre Group's subsequent productions so far were of plays by writers somewhat influenced by Brecht. With help from the Goethe Institute in Alexandria they presented in succession : Friedrich Dürrenmatt's adaptation of Strindberg's *The Dance of Death*, retitled *Let Us Play Strindberg*, at the lobby of the Goethe Institute in 1994; Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade* at El-Shatbi Arts Centre in 1996; and last week, Max Frisch's *Biedermann und die Brandstifter* (translated as *The Fire Raiser* by the British, *The Firebugs* by the Americans and *The Incendiaries* by a German scholar).

For this latest production (co-subsidized by the ProHelvetia Arts Council of Switzerland in Cairo), Doma refitted part of the elegant, wood-panelled lobby of the Goethe Institute to look like a *Café Théâtre*, with little round tables and plates of delicious *patisserie*. The performance space was the area in front of the delicate *fer forgé* small gate which leads into the library, with occasional use of the first landing of the old-fashioned wooden staircase on the left. A number of plastic petrol containers, a few folding chairs, a make-shift table and some plates and cutlery made up all the props, leaving the space free for the six energetic actors who played all the parts as well as the chorus.

Following Durrenmatt's example in *Let Us Play Strindberg*, Doma extensively adapted Frisch's text to bring it nearer home and give it topical relevance. As the characters are given Egyptian names, the town victimized by arsonists becomes Cairo, Alexandria, or any other Egyptian town. Instead of Frisch's chorus of "firemen in helmets" who stay clearly out of the action, confining themselves to comments, observation, warning and lamentation, we have a second-rate company of actors bent on foisting their art on us and alternately enacting the

parts and stepping out of them to comment on the action. Other changes include Biedermann's job (Doma makes him a judge who condemns an innocent man to death instead of a ruthless merchant who sacks his assistant and drives him to suicide); the characters of his wife, Babette, his servant Anna, and the doctor of philosophy (who becomes his own friend rather than the friend of the arsonists, Schmitz and Eisenring).

But by far the most important change is the agressively didactic tone which replaces Frisch's subtle wit and irony and rises in a crescendo to a feverish climax at the end with the actors literally screaming at us fiery quotations from revolutionary poems by Amal Dunqul, Salah Abdul Saboor, Naguib Soroor and the writings of Karl Marx among others. Instead of "a morality without a moral with an afterpiece", as Frisch subtitles his play (in an obvious dig at Brecht), Doma, in his Brechtian zeal, ignores the funny afterpiece (which takes place in hell, identifies the two arsonists as the Devil and Beelzebub and the doctor of philosophy as a long-tailed monkey in charge of the records) and provides a strong, clear moral which transforms the play into an agit-prop piece.

But despite its grating loudness, the tiresomely consistent violent emotionalism which marked Awatif Ibrahim's performance as chorus-leader and Babette, the excessively exaggerated physical expression and vocal delivery of the other actors, the forced attempts to draw laughter by crude farcical means and the general lack of subtlety (something which was never missing in Doma's earlier productions), Doma's version of *The Fire Raisers*, rechristened *Daylight Ghosts*, manages to communicate an urgent sense of danger and comes across as a chilling warning against indifference in the face of fundamentalism, fanaticism and the inevitable disastrous results of gross and flagrant social inequality.

# Singing in the Rain*

Only a Cairene can appreciate the thrill of skipping along the corniche in an April shower in Alexandria. It was dry and sunny when I emerged from *Mihatit Masr* (the central railway station) at 4 p.m. last Wednesday; but I knew it would rain ... it must. In more than 12 years, I have never been to Alexandria to watch a performance by Mahmoud Abu Doma's independent Alternative Theatre troupe without it raining. In my romantic moments, I like to think of this as a kind of magical tryst with the wind and the rain; but maybe Doma and his group schedule their performances to coincide with the rainy spells, or, as I vaguely suspect, only invite me to watch them when they are sure I will be deliciously drenched.

I first became acquainted with their work in the autumn of 1988. At the time they had not thought of themselves as a permanent ensemble and did not have a name; that happened two years later when they came to Cairo to participate in the first Free Theatre Festival in the winter of 1990. They impressed the festival's audience with a performance of Doma's *The Dance of the Scorpions* (a striking variation on *Hamlet*) in the Open Air theatre at the Opera house. In 1988, however, they were just a group of friends who had come together through the Theatre Department at Alexandria university where they studied. They shared, among many natural affinities, a strong dislike for what was being passed off as theatre by the professional companies from Cairo who descend upon their city every summer without fail. Those companies were rarely patronized by Alexandrians and only catered for the

* 30 March 2000.

holidaymakers. In the winter, the city which (though glibly dubbed as the second capital) had no resident theatre companies, state-run or private, was completely deprived of theatre and rated itself extremely lucky if one of its chronically lethargic cultural palaces mustered enough energy to put on even a pallid, half-hearted show. This virtually meant that Alexandrians were denied the pleasure of theatre all the year round. This deplorable state of affairs was resented all the more deeply by Doma and his friends since they were training to make theatre their profession and did not find the prospect of having to uproot themselves and move to Cairo to find work all that palatable. Besides, few companies in Cairo, if any at all, would welcome the kind of work they wanted to do : Doma's subtle, symbolic and highly poetic texts would seem almost esoteric compared to the regular fare and his mode of directing which requires strict discipline and long rehearsal hours on a daily basis would be difficult to accommodate in any company – indeed, would be regarded as penal servitude by the pampered Cairene actors.

I first knew Doma as a postgraduate student at the Academy of Arts. At the end of his 2-year diploma course he gave me three of his plays to read and disappeared. He was so quiet, aloof and hermit-like, so dreadfully shy of making an impression or putting himself forward in any way that by the time I got round to reading his plays I had forgotten what he looked like and could not connect the name with a face. I spent months afterwards trying to track him down. I was so impressed with the plays that I wished to have them published with an enthusiastic introduction from me and wanted his permission for that. When the book eventually appeared, I got an invitation to watch one of the plays in performance; and it was then that I discovered what a

sensitive director Doma really is and how wonderfully talented and passionately dedicated his actors, particularly his long-standing female lead and co-founder of the troupe, Awatif Ibrahim, genuinely are.

*The Castaways* vividly evokes the wild, primeval atmosphere of J.M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* as well as the mysteriously shadowy world of Maeterlinck's plays and unfolds like a gruesome fairytale about a lurid, demonic figure, thrown up by the sea on the shore of a primitive fishing village, ensnaring the souls of its innocent inhabitants in a net of legends and fantastic dreams. It was fittingly performed in the Alexandria Atelier garden and in the silence I thought I could hear the soft swish of the nearby sea. Within a few mimutes, however, I was actually hearing the patter of rain drops on the leaves of the trees under which we sat. The propitious shower arrived right on cue and as the actors became progressively soaked through, with water streaming down Awatif's face and dripping from her hair and flimsy gown, the performance gained in poetry and magic. It was an unforgettable evening; after the show, we made our way in the rain to a Greek tavern (which still used the emblematic blue and white checked table-cloths) to warm ourselves with talk and drinks.

Unfortunately, I never saw the production of Doma's second play, *The Well* — another symbolic and profoundly disturbing and evocative text which takes its inspiration from folk legends and nursery rhymes; it was presented by the troupe in Alexandria after their 1990 visit to Cairo with *The Dance of the Scorpions* (the third in his trio of plays).

In subsequent years, Doma decided, after extended visits to London, the United States and Germany, to widen the scope of his troupe's repertoire and expose them to other authors and modes of

dramatic writing. Inevitably, he faced the endemic, two-pronged problem as all independent-theatre groups in Egypt : space and funds. His minimalist, poor-theatre style of production which depends mainly on the actor's ability to make up for the absence of sets, costumes and all theatrical paraphernalia, went a long way towards solving the space problem : any place was a good place to perform. For the modest funds he needed (not to compensate the actors for the long hours of taxing work they put in a show but merely to help them cover their daily expenses during rehearsals : sandwiches, tea and coffee and transportation), he turned, like other similar troupes, to foreign cultural centres and institutions. This imposed a certain limitation of course, since foreign centres and institutes are not allowed to sponsor activities not relating to the promotion of their respective cultures. In Doma's case, however, it was not felt as a restriction : most of the texts he wanted to produce anyway were foreign; he would choose the play first, then approach the relevant foreign agency. In this way, he managed to present in succession, Edward Albee'e *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, Athol Fugard's *A Place with the Pigs* (which he himself translated), Peter Weiss's *Marat-Sade*, Friedrich Durrenmatt's *Let Us Play Strindberg* and Max Frisch's *The Fire-Raisers*. I always think of the last three plays as Doma's German project and his apotheosis as director.

They were presented singly, in successive years, with generous moral support and material help from the Goethe Institute in Cairo and Alexandria and the ProHelvetia Arts Council of Switzerland. To present all three plays in succession, twice in one week, however, to mark International Theatre Day, needed further financial help and it was generously provided by the Swedish Institute in Alexandria. Strindberg

was Swedish after all and Durrenmatt's play was a variation on his *Dance of Death*.

It rained on the 22nd, the beginning of this mini Garman / Swiss / Swedish / Egyptian festival at the Goethe Institute in Alexandria, an architectural gem. But the entrance hall, leading to the library, where the performance of the *Marat-Sade* took place, was overflowing with eager spectators. On the following day, it rained even harder, with gales and squalls, and the audience still came in hordes and throngs to watch *Let's Play Strindberg*. On the third night, when *The Fire-Raisers* was presented, I was not there (I had already watched the play a few months before); but I know from reliable sources that it was equally well-attended and enthusiastically received and, also, for all it matters, that on that night when I was absent it did not rain.

The performances I saw were mesmeric, enchanting, mind-boggling, soul-uplifting, and all such other epithets as we critics have been drilled into regarding as corny by our skeptical, cynical, postmodern times. With only seven actors, playing all the parts in all three plays, music designer Ihab Kandil and costume designer Alia El-Geridy, Doma treated us to a magical, richly variegated pageant where all the actors (Awatef Ibrahim, Ahmed Abdel Rahman, Iman Imam, Khaled Raafat, El-Sayed Ragab, Said Kabil, and Mustafa Moussa) acted like veritable shamans, taking the art of acting back to its roots in magic and ritual reincarnation, and where humour battled with pathos, cruelty with sympathy, barbed satire with tenderness and brutality with Christian charity. Such an exceptional theatrical event is a tribute to Doma and his Alternative Theatre troupe and a credit to the Goethe and Swedish Institutes and ProHelvetia. Short of wishing that

the whole of Cairo could move to Alexandria to watch this thrilling triple bill, I earnestly hope the troupe will find the means to present their work in Cairo, even though the chance of it raining here is practically nill.

## A Faustian End-Game*

By 7.30, the rain which had continued the whole afternoon, had stopped. The flagstones of the open courtyard outside The Garage, at the Jesuit Cultural Centre in Alexandria, were still wet; but the air was dry, crisp and tinglingly fresh, like pure, sparkling wine. Taking deep glups of it made me a bit heady and caused my rusty Cairene lungs to smart. There was a long table on one side spread with tea and coffee, plenty of dark brown chairs with wicker seats here and there and an old, massive tree right by the entrance to the tin-roofed theatre. The low, white-washed brick wall of the courtyard was fringed on three sides with the thick foliage of trees, hugging it from outside, and bordered on the inside with a plentiful variety of potted plants. Light came from unobtrusive, old-fashioned lanterns, fixed to the wall on all sides at discreet intervals, bathing the whole space in a soft, yellow haze – a tiny pool of light under the vast dark skies, pathetic, but warmly hospitable and comforting. The elegant rustic simplicity of that courtyard, its cozy, cloistered atmosphere, had an old world charm; it felt vaguely familiar, like a long-forgotten, distant memory, a dimly remembered dream. "Now comes upon me long forgotten yearning ... Deep stirs my heart," I remembered Goethe saying in his dedication of *Faust*.

Goethe's *Faust* with only seven actors and a violinist, in a tiny theatre, with a tiny stage, did not seem an easy proposition, quite daunting in fact, I thought as I examined the cast list on the back of the black, elegant programme sheet handed to me. No, not exactly

* 11 April 2002.

Goethe's rambling epic drama, the programme told me as I turned to the front; only a version of it called *Faust's Dreams*, composed and directed by Mahmoud Abu Doma in collaboration with the members – performers and technical crew – of the independent Alternative Theatre Group he founded back in 1988. As sponsors or co-producers, the programme mentioned : The Jesuits Cultural Centre and the Goethe and Swedish Institutes in Alexandria, plus special thanks to The Ford Foundation in Cairo. An impressive list, I grinned; good for the Altenrative theatre; they have proved more resourceful than most independent theatre groups in matters of fund-raising. Not that they ended up with a big budget, as I discovered later; only just enough to cover costs and running expenses, including a little pocket money for the actors during the six months of daily rehearsals it took the project to materialize.

We walked into the theatre and took our places to the sad, sweet tunes of Mohamed Barakat's violin which went on until everyone was seated. During the performance, his live playing alternated with Ihab Qandil's riveting sound-track, which ingeniously wove together selections from the music of the Japanese composer, Kitaro, the Greek composer, Spanodaikes, and the sound-tracks of *The Temptation of Christ, Pearl Harbour*, and *Jesus of Montreal*. The scene which faced us was bizarre in an ominous sort of way, at once intriguing and disturbing. A small, cramped yellow room with charred walls (as if it had gone through fire), and a number of small, open windows (four at the back, two on each side), placed in a zigzag line, very high up, quite out of reach of anyone except a giant, and looking out into the darkness beyond, like blind eyes. On a small, low platform at the back, was an empty wheelchair. Next to it, sat a human-size puppet, with a bald

head, dressed in a long black coat, and wearing a metal contraption round its head, consisting of a crown-like ring, attached to the empty wire frame of an absent mask. Flanking the wheel chair on the other side was the trunk of a dead tree with a single branch. Next to the tree, on the lower level, were four more life-like puppets, dressed in the same long black coat, with roller skates attached to their shoes. They were equally bald, but their heads and faces had been painted to show the brain inside the skull, a white clown's face, with a smile and tears, or a black half mask. (The puppets and set were designed by the director in collaboration with Hadeel Nazmi and Ayman Abu Doma). Downstage, close to the audience, the seven actors – Awatif Ibrahim (nature), Khalid Ra'fat (Faust), Sa'id Qabil (the crippled mock-saviour), Mohamed El-Hagrasi (Mephisto), Doa Abdallah (fitfully-Margareta and other females) and Mohamed Abd-El-Qadir and Ahmed El-Masri (chorus and, vaguely, other characters) – all in black suits and gloves and white shirts, except for Awatif who wore a black lace dress, sat behind two coffin-like wooden boxes, completely still, looking at each other with a mixture of horror, sorrow and wonder; they froze in that position, without so much as the bat of an eye, until all the audience had taken their places and the strains of the violin stopped.

A moment of rapt silence ... then the actors sprang to life. They turned to face us, and started pounding the boxes with their fists in a rising crescendo. When it reached its climax, the violence suddenly ebbed and all was quiet. Then the chant began – a flagrant parody of the Easter song which stops Faust from killing himself with a poisonous draught in the "Night" sequence which opens Goethe's text. Instead of Goethe's "Christ is arisen ! / Joy to mortality," sung by a chorus of angels, Doma's supplicants chant : "Our Lord, / Do not come back. /

The voices here have become terrifying, / So has the stench you had dispelled. / All your green crops were burned on rainy nights, / And all the stories we told each other, over and over, a hundred times, have fallen silent. / There is nothing left here but the cold, the sand and the boredom, / Nothing but desolate nights, / Nothing but vexation and discontent. / Do not trouble about people anymore; / They will soon forget you, / Even before the coming of autumn. / So, do not come back, / Do not come back." This chant, delivered with profound earnestness, set the tone and pointed clearly in the direction that version of *Faust* would follow.

In a world lorded over by a dummy and a crippled, skeptical saviour, there can be no salvation. And no tragedy, heroism, sense of reality, or integral characters either. Hence the use of five human-size puppets as active performers, complementing the human cast, the minimal use of words and the heavy reliance on dance and movement. The world of Doma's Faust is one of "witchery and dreams" – the world of the "Walpurgis Night" sequence in the original text. In this metaphorical setting, the story of humanity's quest for salvation is ritualistically replayed in symbolic movement and dance (choreographed by Awatif Ibrahim), in shorthand as it were, in a highly grotesque manner. The Polish critic Jan Kott has perceptively remarked that "grotesque takes over the themes of tragedy and poses the same fundamental questions. Only it's answers are different." In another place he says : "The grotesque is a criticism of the absolute in the name of frail human experience and offers no consolation."

This is, perhaps, what Doma was trying to achieve in his *Faust's Dreams*. The life-like dummies and the puppet-like actors, led by Faust

and Mephisto, grotsequely reenact, in the form of hallucinations, the stories of the Fall, the Deluge, the coming of Christ and his raising, as well as Faust's insatiable longings and his final degradation to the status of a floppy rag-doll. Their stage metaphorically lies between heaven and earth; but in performance, it is a little space, ironically bounded on one side by a stagey coffin and on the other by a raised platform, inhabited by an inert god who is no longer even a puppet-master but merely a dummy, and his sad, paralyzed son, who wears his father's wire crown and mask after he "is arisen" and sits slumped in a wheelchair, intermittently asking himself aloud : "Who am I? A mirror or a corpse waiting for a merciful killer? Is it possible I shall nerve die? Is there a hope this could be a lie?" The spirit of nature (Awatif Ibrahim), though she can move freely between heaven and earth, give momentary solace to Faust with a joyful, ebullient dance, is ultimately helpless and can only look on in dismay. Her symbolic attempt to eradicate the original sin and abolish the biblical history of humanity by wrenching the apple of desire from Faust's breast, in a violent, primitive blood-ritual, and placing it back on the tree of knowledge, is futile and laughable. The tree, if it ever existed, has long been dead.

To compound the irony, both heaven and earth, and the writhing, floundering humanity caught between them, are trapped in a grimy, little room, vividly reminiscent of the one inhabited by Hamm and Clov in Beckett's *Endgame*. What lies beyond that room is very much the same as what Clov, who like Doma's dummies cannot sit, sees out of his high window. Perhaps worse, even. With the help of a chair, Clov can reach his kitchen window, and when he does, there is still enough light outside to allow him to see the emptiness around him. But in

Doma's play, it needs a long ladder to get to the windows, and if one does, one will only see a wall of darkness (literally, the dark back wall of the theatre). It was as if the nature Clov has described as dead had crept into Doma's yellow room in the form of the dead tree, reducing Awatif, as the spirit of nature, to a mere illusion and obliterating the very idea of "outside" or "beyond". There is nothing in Doma's play but that absurd, little yellow box; and the universe enclosed inside it, with its inhabitants and the stories they enact, is no more than a game of charades. One scene, however, redeems the utter bleakness of that vision. At the end, the actors scramble up the platform and repeat the blood ritual they had symbolically performed on Faust, but, this time, on the mock-saviour, wrenching out of his beart — guess what ? A pink carnation. My heart throbbed violently when they raised it and I started crying. The poor, helpless deity had finally found his merciful killer and humanity had a dim ray of hope, a fleeting glimpse of beauty. Doma had set out to firmly shut the door in the face of hope; but at the last minute, he left a little crack open.

Those familiar with Doma's work can easily trace the box-of-illusions image, together with the Mephistophelean theme, to his first play. In *The Castaways*, a mysterious man is thrown up by the sea on the shore of a fishing village and gradually corrupts all its inhabitants with the help of a small box which he calls the magical box of dreams. Except for illusions, the box was as empty then as it is in this play; but in *The Castaways*, the dreams were clearly those of the villagers. In the current production, the dream is collective and could be God's or Mephistopheles', as much as Faust's. Over the years, and as his pessimism deepened, Doma has progressively tended to play down the verbal element in favour of the audiovisual. What can be communicated

through movement and dance, the use of sets and props, he says, is better left unsaid. In his third play, *The Dance of Scorpions*, a reworking of *Hamlet*, he used masks and human-size cut-out paper dolls to represent many characters, including all of Claudius's courtiers. But in the past ten years, puppets and masks were conspicuously absent from his work. The plays he staged during that time – including Edward Albee's *Who Is Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, Athol Fugard's *A Place with the Pigs*, Strindberg's *The Dance of Death*, Peter Weiss's *Marasade* and Max Frisch's *The Fire Raiser* – did not require them. *Faust* was different. The story has a history as a popular marionette show in the 18th century and it was a puppet Faust that first kindled Goethe's imagination when a boy in Frankfurt. Like the Italian-German director, Roberto Ciulli, who staged the prologue of Part I of the play as a puppet show, in his *Pinocchio-Faust* which visited Cairo a few years ago, Doma thinks the play calls for the use of puppets.

At Atinios, after the show, he told me he had found working with puppets an overwhelming experience. "They tend to take on a life of their own," he said; sometimes he was afraid to be with them alone in the theatre and the actors felt something of this too. Most of the rehearsal time was spent working with the puppets, developing the illusion they were real, breathing life into them, as it were. "We felt like sorcerers conjuring up spirits and this brought us very close to Faust," he added.

The following morning, it was bright and sunny; one forgets in Cairo how blue the sky can be. The air sparkled like crystal, and there was a fresh breeze, carrying a faint smell of the sea. I had two hours before my Cairo bus and decided to walk. Leaving hotel San Giovanni behind, I headed in the direction of *Mehatit El-Raml*. When I reached

Sidi Gaber street, however, I found myself turning into it without thinking, then turning right into Port Sa'id street. I was unconsciously making my way to The Garage. I passed the gray metal gate of the Jesuits Centre without noticing it, perhaps because it was closed; it opens at 10 a.m. and it was still quite early. I walked a long way, enjoying the tiny, run-down old-fashioned shops, tucked away under the weather-beaten, graceful old buildings, stopping sometimes to peer into their dim insides, and all the time thanking God there was no modern supermarket in sight.

I came upon a genial-looking old man, sitting in the sun outside his ancient darning-shop, needle in hand, poring over an exquisite piece of tapestry. I stood watching him for a couple of minutes before he lifted his face to me with a gentle inquiring smile. "I am lookling for the Jesuits Cultural Centre," I heard myself saying. "You have already passed it", he said, pointing in the direction I came from. "It's right next to the *baladi* bakery". I remembered passing a small crowd of people standing outside what looked like a small, dark medieval cavern and being handed loaves of lovely steaming bread by some invisible being. I retraced my steps; the gate of the centre was wide open this time. I passed through, nodding at the two men sitting outside it. It seemed strange they did not ask me where I was going or what my business was. It occurred to me that a terrorist could easily walk in with a bomb and the idea was worrying. But this was a place of worship, I reassured myself, a holy ground where "prayer," in T.S. Eliot's lovely phrase, "has been valid;" surely God will protect it. I concluded that all this talk of terrorism had polluted my thoughts. The small wooden door leading to the Garage wasn't locked. I turned the handle and stepped into the courtyard.

It was completely deserted and hushed – not a soul in sight, and no sound except the rustle of leaves in the wind. It was as if I had stepped into a different world all by myself and this sense of complete solitude was utterly overwhelming. I was flooded with an infinite sense of peace, a strange sense of nullity, of total obliteration, as if I had left my mundane, everyday self by the door. The long wooden table had gone, and all the chairs except for a couple under the tree. I dived into the salon adjoining the theatre – a large, elegant, multi-purpose room, alternately used as a cultural café, a conference room and an exhibition hall. It was dark and completely silent. I said "hello" aloud and my voice sounded horribly jarring. I drew aside the thick black curtain leading to the theatre and stepped inside. I wanted to have another look at Doma's magical yellow box which had haunted me the night before. Again, not a soul in sight.

Stumbling in the dark, I could only see at first the left corner of the dimly lighted stage; the rest was hidden by the tiers of seats rising from the edge of the stage to the back of the auditorium. As I advanced, the view expanded until suddenly I stopped and gasped : there was someone on stage. I was completely startled by this unexpected, eerily still and silent presence. There was a moment of panic, of real, irrational terror before I realized it was Doma's mock- divine dummy, left in its place since last night. I still felt nervous and vaguely threatened. The dummy sitting on the platform was looking intently at something. Following its gaze, I discovered the four other grotesque dummies lined up against the wall on the left, their heads turned towards it. I could almost swear they were deep in silent conversation, discussing some grave matter or planning some frightful mischief. I had read about the primitive, incomprehensible fear of dolls and their

magical powers, shared by all humanity at the level of the collective unconscious; at that moment, I knew I was experiencing it as a frightening reality and understood how Doma could be afraid to be alone with them in the theatre. I turned my back and tiptoed outside, feeling shaken like someone who had seen an apparition and marvelling afresh about the magic of theatre.

In the courtyard, the bright sunlight had dimmed to pearly gray; the fresh breeze had developed into a gale; the trees sheltering the wall swayed furiously in the wind, rising and falling to its frantic rhythm and reaching up so high sometimes as if they would catch the thick folds of dark clouds rolling and billowing across the sky. Then rain drops, a light patter at first on the tin roof, growing fast into loud drumming. I sat on one of the chairs under the tree and watched the rain sliding merrily off the glistening roof, soaking the trees, the pots of plants, the flagstones, the wall and everything in sight, including myself, while Doma's dummies continued their hushed conversation inside the shadowy, empty theatre undisturbed. I was wet, cold and numb, but profoundly peaceful inside, as I hadn't felt for a long, long time.

On the bus that carried me to Cairo I remembered that Faust had wagered if ever he found something he wished to endure forever, he would immediately and irrevocably forfeit his life and soul to the devil. At the end of Part II of the play, he has a last vision in which he stands on free land, among free people and enjoys a moment he wishes to endure and, therefore, dies. Were I to make a similar wager, I thought, my experience at The Garage that morning and the night before would be the thing I would wish to endure forever, whatever the cost.

**Khalid El-Sawi's**

***Movement***

(est. 1990)

# A Mad World, My Masters ![*]

If you love clowns, the circus, carnivals, pantomime, street and fairground shows and the old silent movies, you will give yourself a treat if you make your way to Al-Hanager and join the Movement troupe in their latest and carziest theatrical venture, ironically christened *The Birth*. You should be warned, however, that the performance lasts for over three and a half hours, plus a ten-minute interval between its two parts. But then, you do not have to watch it all the same evening; like a revue or a circus programme, it is made up of self-contained units that can be enjoyed separately, and the general atmosphere is so relaxed and informal you can easily stroll in and out, or leave in the interval and come back on another evening to enjoy the second part of the entertainment. But having said that, I must hasten to add that on the two occasions I watched *The Birth*, the audience were quite happy to sit through the whole performance, maintaining throughout a lively and noisy rapport with the actors. Some, it was obvious from their irritating habit of giving away the punch lines by beating the actors to them, had seen the show before and come back bringing along friends and relatives.

*The Birth* is billed as a "musical comedy", but it hardly fits the bill. Musical comedy invariably has a degree, however minimal, of narrative coherence and dramatic focus. What *The Birth* offers, on the other hand, is a sprawling, non-linear, motley congolomeration of stock stituations and characters, familiar comic routines, and popular songs. This hackneyed stuff, however, is recast in the mould of parody and

[*] 6 November 1997.

burlesque (which marks the highly self-conscious style of the performance) and recharged with an anarchic energy that defuses all slogans, undercuts and debunks most values and ends up affirming nothing but the joy of making theatre.

The satirical reading of modern Egyptian history and reality offered in *The Birth* (which turns out to be a series of miscarriages) concentrates on the plight of the young and enlightened and is projected from their point of view. Beleagured by military dictatorship, political chicanery, a stultified, authoritarian educational system, poverty, unemployment, corruption, cultural and ethical confusion, a crumbling ethos and the spread of bigotry, hypocrisy and fanaticism, they can hardly be expected to take a cool, objective, analytical view of their situation. What we get from author and director Khalid El-Sawi in this production is not an integrated critique of modern Egyptian reality in all its complexity, but, rather, a Brechtian kind of totalitarian dichotomy that leaves no third space where one can elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the 'other' of one's self. From the very initial scene, which parodies the opening scene of Ionesco's *Jacques, ou la Soumission* (itself a parody of bourgeois conformity), and right through all the sketches and interludes, the characters are clearly and uncompromisingly divided, in black and white terms, into oppressor and oppressed, exploiter and exploited, rich and poor, etc. Such black and white polarity puts paid to any attempt at complex characterization and can only produce stereotypes or flat cardboard cut-outs.

*The Birth*, however, deftly avoids this, and the whole issue of characterization. In a most un-Brechtian move, it manages to subvert and discredit the very simplistic dichotomy it proposes by revealing it,

through self-parody, as preposterously naive and melodramatic. Moreover, the actors' constant trafficking in both good and evil parts and their swift, and sometimes disconcertingly abrupt, alternation from one extreme to the other make a travesty of this dichotomy and expose it as a mere theatrical convention rooted in melodrama.

If one has to chart the genealogy of this slick, yet delightfully splintered and rambling show, one will not find it in Brecht's epic theatre, in the political agit-prop, nor in any of the popular forms of artistic entertainment it harnesses both as material and structural devices. It relates more convincingly to the type of cynical, satirical musical show developed by Samir El-Asfouri in his unforgettable *Honey is Honey and Onions are Onions* on the model of the continental political cabaret which flourished at the turn of the century and featured parodies, grotesques, satirical chansons and folk songs. Indeed, at one point El-Sawi deliberately evokes El-Asfouri's *Honey* by including one of its famous songs in a direct gesture of acknowledgement. In other respects too — the free-spirited use of borrowed material, the parodistic approach to the cultural tradition, the offhand casualness of the dialogue, the campy sense of performance, and the seamless movement between observational and surreal humour — the two works are similar and seem to share a postmodern approach to art that has been dubbed by Bonnie Marranca "the Ridiculous aesthetic".

In theatre, the 'Ridiculous', which evolved informally as a definable sensibility in the mid-sixties without manifestos or official theories, can be described, in Marranca's words as "an anarchic undermining of political, sexual, psychological and cultural categories, frequently in dramatic structures that parody classical literary forms or

re-function American popular entertainments and always allude to themselves as 'performances'". It "tends toward camp, kitsch, transvestism, the grotesque, flamboyant visuals and literary dandyism", she adds. Compared to the absurd, it is "less intellectual, more earthy, primal and liberated," and its "dependency on the icons, artifacts and entertainments of mass culture — the 'stars', old movies, popular songs, television and advertising — (make it) a truly indigenous American approach to making theatre."

Of those who have seen El-Asfouri's *Honey* and El-Sawi's *Birth*, many will concede that the 'Ridiculous', as defined by Marranca, can be traced, in a modified form, in both works. This implies not so much direct influence (I do not know if either El-Asfouri or El-Sawi is familiar with the work of the artists grouped by Marranca under the rubric Theatre of the Ridiculous) as a coincidence of artistic response to the challenges and stresses of certain historical moments.

But whatever its artistic provenance, *The Birth* is wonderful theatre and great fun. Once you surrender to it, you will perceive under the seeming formlessness subtle correspondences and thematic and formal links that hold it together; and though long by Al-Hanager standards, it moves at such a galloping pace that you hardly feel the time. Indeed, at the end of the performance, when the actors tumble off the stage, having given up all pretentions as to being anything but gaily and weirdly dressed clowns, and entice us into a communal farewell dance that takes us out of the auditorium (which, together with the stage, is dressed to look like a fairground marquee or a circus tent), one feels a pang, a sense of desolation. For me, the most compelling and enthralling aspect of *The Birth*, and its major source of power and

fascination, is the brilliant ensemble acting of El-Sawi's talented and committed young cast. They played a wide range of roles (including cross-gender and animal parts) with joy, zest and panache and gave the Hanager clientle the best ensemble acting they had ever seen at this venue. Given the state of Al-Hanager today, you may never see such an ensemble of fine actors again.

**Khalid Galal's**

***Encounter***

(est. 1990)

## Carnival of Ghosts*

Dealing with foreign cultural centres has always been, in Egypt as well as in most Arab countries, a hazardous business. At best, it could bring you under the fire of xenophotbics and jingoists, calling into question your loyalties, allegiances and cultural identity; at worst, it could make you the subject of close official, or unofficial, scrutiny.

In the past, when most of the Arab world was under foreign occupation, "collusion with the enemy" was the usual charge brought to the door of heedless culture-seekers. In the 1940s a university teacher (later to become a prominent dramatist and writer) was rumoured to be a spy on account of his frequent visits to the British Council (the poor man was only trying for a scholarship); and since rumours die hard, the stigma clung to him like a bad smell long after he was proved innocent beyond a shadow of doubt.

The same thing happened when the British Council sponsored a private theatrical troupe calling itself *Firqat el-Tali'a* (The Avant-garde) in 1942 : despite a successful career which lasted for two years and featured many brilliant performances in Cairo and the provinces, the members of the troupe had a hard time dispelling doubts that they were 'stooges' of the enemy, paid to propagate his culture and subversive ideas.

The French were better off since their colonialist aspect was not immediately visible in the streets of Cairo in the figure of uniformed soldiers and pale-faced officials. George Abyad, the famous classical

* 17 October 1991.

actor and director, could draw on French financial resources with impunity. On five different occasions, between 1910 and 1944, the French government helped him establish and maintain his own French-speaking theatrical company which boasted many performances at the old opera house.

The 1950s and 1960s present a different picture. Under the impact of the policial changes in Egypt and in the wake of the 1956 war the British and French receded to the background (the Americans had not yet arrived on the cultural scene) and the Russians and socialist states of Eastern Europe pushed their way to the fore. Their growing influence reached its climax and emblematic peak in 1968 with the establishment of the Theatre of One Hundred Seats at the Czech Cultural Centre where for two years, until 1970, a group of brilliant artists, like Ahmed Abdel-Halim (now head of the National Theatre) and his wife, actress Aida Abdel-Aziz, together with director Mohamed Abdel-Aziz, critic Hoda Hibisha and the brothers Ahmed Fouad and Abdel-Moneim Selim worked, performing many texts banned by the censor.

The ideological banner there was, naturally, red or, at least, bright pink. And since the system's declared ideology was socialist, while its real practices were dictatorial and autocratic, the group had to walk a very thin rope indeed. When the state opted for a different ideological course in the 1970s, the fortunes of the foreign cultural centres reflected the change, adding another chapter to their chequered history.

In the wake of his quarrel with the Russians, President Sadat clamped down on the 'bloody' centres, suspending their activities and depriving artists of a valuable haven and a much needed theatrical venue. And though the Western centres escaped the president's wrath,

they were somewhat intimidated by his peremptory stand. The next few years witnessed a dwindling of their role; theatre artists seldom sought their help and Egyptian performances there became a rare occurrence. They concentrated on language courses, scholarships and the odd art exhibition or lecture. After all, these were much safer and less controversial channels of cooperation and were, therefore, cultivated at the expense of that anarchic, unpredictable activity called theatre. Not that theatre, or culture in general, were very much in demand right then. That was the great age of philistinism, bred out of the economic open-door policy (the worst type of *laisser-faire* imaginable). It was the age of rampant commercial values, engendering cheap entertainers and profit-seekers and spawning a plethora of slipshod musicals, tawdry farces and insipid melodramas.

Things began to look up in the 1980s. The relative degree of liberal democracy adopted by the government allowed the foreign centres in turn to adopt a more positive attitude towards the theatre and gave them more leeway. Gradually, a thin trickle of good homegrown experimental shows began to materialise through their ministrations, the latest being Khaled Galal's *Carnival of Ghosts*.

Khaled Galal, though still a student at the Theatre Institute of the Academy of Arts, is a graudate of Cairo University and has already established a substantial reputation as a talented director at university theatre festivals and competitions. In fact, the Russian Cultural Centre thought two of his productions well worth hosting last year and gave them a run of two days each. These were Mohamed Salmawy's *Come Back Tomorrow* and Samir Sarhan's *A King Looking for a Job*.

The launching of *Encounter* (Liqa') coincided with the preparations for the first Free Theatre Festival last September and its début production of Pinter's *Mountain Language* was chosen to open the festival at the Small Hall of the Opera House on 1st October. The ingenuity and technical skill of Galal were quite obvious, together with a lyrical quality and a sensitive sense of rhythm.

To perform once more in public, *Encounter*, which has neither legal status nor licence to practice, let alone a home or funds, needed the support and protection of an official umbrella. Galal approached the French Cultural Centre to host his new production of Maurice Dekobra's *Carnival of Ghosts* (*Carnaval des Revenants*). He had earlier directed it for Cairo University, but the production was banned because the *dramatis* personae included a harlot. He was asked to choose between the production and the harlot; he chose the harlot. Consequently, the earlier production never saw the light.

The people at the French Centre, however, had no such scruples and proved quite amenable to the idea of having the play complete with harlot. The fact that it was a French text was of crucial importance and this underlines one of the most crippling drawbacks of relying on the help of foreign cultural centres : you simply have to work within each centre's cultural boundaries. Another serious drawback which Khaled Galal and his troupe will have to face, and which El-Gretly and others before him have had to put up with, is the fierce antagonism of the theatrical profession which sometimes takes the form of vicious raillery and venomous ridicule or light-hearted disparagement and dismissal. It's an insidious war of attrition which seeks ultimately to discredit and marginalise artists' contributions on the grounds of their alleged élitism.

"They tackle foreign texts and Western issues alien to our society and culture and address themselves to a small élite audience, a marginal minority, rather than to the common man," is the usual complaint (invariably laced with bitterness or tinged with envy). But just as others have survived such hostile propaganda and weathered the attacks, eventually forcing even their direst critics to acknowledge their talent and achievement, I dare say Galal and his troupe will survive them too.

*Carnaval des Revenants* premiered last month at the Munira branch of the French Cultural Centre where it ran for three days, then moved for a further three-day run at the Centre's branch in Heliopolis, coming back to Munira for one more performance. Shortly, it moves to Alexandria to play at the Centre's branch there where the Alexandrians are likely to derive as much pleasure from it as the Cairenes have done.

Indeed, despite some technical unevenness and rough edges, the production is generally rewarding and confirms one's faith in Galal's talent and ability. The play, which tells of a group of dead people who are brought back to life by a scientist only to discover that death was better, is predominantly sober and moralistic in tone. Into this heavy-handed text, Galal injected huge doses of parodic comedy and farce without sacrificing the macabre element or the general air of wistfulness. He condensed the play, adumbrating some scenes and replacing others with imaginative mime sequences which at times evoke certain familiar cinematic cichés with hilarious consequences.

In places, it is true, the show betrays El-Gretly's influence, particularly in the use of puppet-like postures, lurid make-up and headgear. However, the many flashes of originality more than make up for what is after all quite an understandable slip given the extreme youth of the director.

The future of Encounter is still very much in the balance; whether it fades or goes on to achieve a prestigious reputation is up to its members and, I suppose, to fate or the powers that be. But they will certainly need all the help they can get and one hopes that the French and other cultural centres will continue to extend their moral and material support to them and the other struggling talents of the Egyptian fringe.

## A Statue Comes to Life*

Papa Bacchus was unwilling to let 1993 go without a roaring send-off. For a master of reveals he picked out bright young director Khalid Galal, and the master roped in his bunch of zany acolytes. The scene of revelry was, oddly enough, the solemnly sober theatre of the Higher Youth and Sports Council. There, they arrived, on 28th December, in full force, waving the banners of The Horus Club and sporting a cute badge figuring a pompous red robin in Pharaonic gear; with two spindlelegs firmly astride, one wing akimbo and the other raised up high, this cartoon version of the mythical ancient Egyptian bird-god and saviour was a fit comment on the nineties and much more in tune with the ironic bent of the age.

For the evening's entertainment, they chose a fitting theme : the adventures of an old statue come to life in the ninties. The title of the play, Mohsen Miselhi's *Elli Bana Masr* (He Who Built Egypt) may sound dangerously jingoistic and ominously didactic, but nothing could be farther from the spirit of the show. The multifarious paradoxes and many absurdities which infest our dalily life in Egypt nowadays are the subject, the target and the butt of humour here, and they appear all the more fantastical when seen through the dazed eyes of a visitor from the past.

The visitor in question is no less than the great financier, industrialist, banker and patron of the arts, Tal'at Harb, whose bronze statue graces the square that bears his name in downtown Cairo. One

* 8 January 1994.

fine morning, on a very ordinary day, the statue, having reached the end of its tether, walks off its pedestal unnoticed amid the crazy medley of sounds and sights. Questioned by a young couple on whose unwilling mercy he forces himself, he bursts out : "For years I've borne the dust, the dirt, the noise, the vulgarity and the pollution and I didn't mind. But now, I do not understand and I intend to do." His quest which plunges him into new and hitherto undreamt of depths of absursity is further complicated by the police hunt his disappearance triggers off; and for the rest of the play, the chasers and the chased are inextricably caught in a frenzied farcical whirl.

At a breathless pace, Galal's production presented the thrilled audience with one grotesquely surrealistic canvas after another. The statue seemed about the only sane character on the scene; everything else looked quirky. The director overlaid the dialogue with wildly schizophrenic movement patterns and gestural behaviour so that it seemed completely divorced from situation and setting. Indeed, reality as portrayed in the play seemed to split right down the middle, sending the characters tumbling, spinning and whirling down a deep chasm.

Far from yielding understanding, Tal'at Harb's quest nearly pushes him over the edge. But if the production fails to explain the present to the statue, it at least portrays it to the audience in stunningly vivid and graphic terms. That we have become less sensitive than dead matter is the message of the play and in performance it was translated visually into the paradox of the living human as puppet.

It is interesting to compare the adventures and discoveries of the statue of Tal'at Harb here with those of Mohamed El-Muwilhi's hero,

Isa Ibn Hisham, in the novel bearing his name and published in 1907 (after appearing as a serial in 1898). The two are visitors from the past and both are shocked by the present. In the case of Ibn Hisham, however, the ills are social and moral and not past remedy; a stricter supervision and some reform bills could set things right. What Tal'at Harb faces, on the other hand, is a world irretrievably out of joint, overrun by crazy marionettes and haywire robots.

The nineteen young actors who undertook the show, all university students and graduates and all members of the Horus Club, were incredibly proficient; they doubled and trebled, slipping in and out of different parts at dizzying spead. Half way through, my head began to swim and I was seeing double – an exhilarating sensation considering that the bar at the theatre offers nothing but soft drinks. The show left me with a strong craving for more of the same intoxicating stuff.

## Brush Up Your Shakespeare*

It was just before Bairam when I stoically decided to brave the traffic and make my way to El-Tali'a to watch Khalid Galal's *Shakespeare, One-Two*. The street where the theatre stands, just off Ataba square, was swarming with stentorian street-vendors and clamourous shoppers; and their litter – a colourful assortment of all known and unidentifiable sorts of rubbish – made the mounds of dust and rubble that have become a fixed feature of the street since work on the new metro line started look oddly picturesque. The radio (cassette-player?) of the grubby sandwich bar facing the theatre was blaring a raucous song at full blast while the *mu'ezzin* of the mosque next door was doing his best to drown it. By the time I reached the theatre I was in a fiercely misanthropic mood and didn't want to see anybody or hear another sound — not even the words of the Bard.

I expected a small, sedate audience – predominantly middle-aged, high-brow and lovers of the classics. After all, with the sumptuous feast of commercial comedies, farces and musicals the Egyptian television regularly lays out on such holy occasions, very few people would want to spoil their appetite by swallowing in advance a large chunk of Shakespearean tragedy.

I was wrong. Though dauntingly billed as a production that crams in the space of two and a half hours, with a 10-minute interval, condensed versions of *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, and *Hamlet*, *Shakespeare, One-Two* attracted a huge audience that night

* 23 April 1998.

(and continues to do so I hear). The auditorium was packed, and the majority were young people. Most of them, I guessed, had seen Galal's earlier work, or sampled some of it, and came expecting a light-hearted romp through the plays, with lots of parody and burlesque, much to delight the eye and little to tax the brain.

If that was what they came expecting, Galal did not disappoint them : the nimble, blithe style was there, and comic scenes galore. But he also surprised them, and astonished and delighted me. I had not realized how much he had artistically developed and matured since the last production he did before he left for Italy in 1969 to spend a year and a half honing his talent. When I first met him in 1989, he was still a commerce undergraduate presenting a student production of Mohammed Salmawy's *Next In Line* at the Russian cultural centre. After watching the performance I was sure he had the makings of a great director — a vivid visual imagination, an inventive mind, a sensitive ear and sense of rhythm, a knack for filling the stage with lively, contrapuntal action, a daring spirit and strange capacity, far beyond his 21 years, to lead and strictly control a huge cast. More importantly, he was not imitating anybody and seemed to be intuitively evolving a style all his own.

What was he doing studying commerce? Family pressure, as usual. He hated commerce and had wanted to join the Theatre Institute. He could do so, he was told, but not before studying something 'solid' and getting a 'real' degree that could secure him a living. What if he didn't make it in the theatre business? Shouldn't he have something to fall back on? And so, it was the faculty of commerce where he spent four years — not really studying commerce as much as directing plays for

his fellow students and occasionally acting. At the end of them, he knew more about theatre than commerce.

He graduated in 1990 and in December of the same year his beautiful, lyrical production of Harold Pinter's *Mountain Language* was chosen to open the first Free Theatre Festival at the small hall of the Opera House. It was a big challenge for both Galal and the Festival and a lot depended on the kind of reception the work would get. It was his first exposure to an audience different from what he had been used to. The festival, which needed publicity but had no money for it, had invited the top people in the theatre, the media, the ministry of culture and the Theatre Institute, and many celebrities. It was amazing how many responded and how many had turned up without an invitation; it was a nightmare trying to seat them according to their degree of importance (to the festival of course) without bruising anybody's ego. Finally, we gave up in despair and decided that "first come, first served" was the safest policy. I knew that Galal was trembling backstage. It was make or break for him and the whole project. Barring the theatre reviewers and some sympathetic journalists, none of these important people would bother to turn up at another show in the festival; it would be solely judged on the strength of this one work. He passed the test with flying colours; and that night marked the real birth of Galal's independent theatre group which he christened *Liqa* (Encounter).

A year later, in 1991, he realized his old dream and joined the Theatre Institute as a full-time student in the department of acting and directing. But work with *Liqa* continued : *Carnival of Ghosts* was presented at the French Cultural Centre in 1991; an exciting production

of Yusef Idris's *The Striped Ones* was one of the highlights of the second Free Theatre Festival in 1992; and Ionesco's *Macbett*, translated by Huda Wasfi and touched up with local colour by Galal, was hosted by the French Cultural Centre in 1993. Then *Liqa*, like many other independent theatre groups, began to fall apart. It was perhaps natural; not just because people grow up and develop other interests and plans, or simply get tired, or feel insecure about the future. The Free Theatre Movement itself seemed to have fizzled out and its festival had come under the wings of the government, becoming a travesty of itself. Galal had already sensed the disintegration of his group before it actually happened. 1992 found him working with a group of amateurs under the umbrella of The Higher Council of Youth and Sport and coming up with a brilliant production of Mohsen Misilhi's *He Who Built Egypt*. But the breakup of the group, though they have remained friends, took its toll of Galal's energy and enthusiasm. His later productions, including his version of Mamdouh Udwan's *The Lamp*, which was the best of them, lacked the glow and sure touch of the earlier works and hinted at the lackadaisical state of the man behind them. In 1995 he was 27, with a degree in theatre, and so much work behind him. What then? Where to go from there?

A grant from the ministry of culture to go to Italy and work with Italian theatre artists for a year and a half was a timely gift and a life-saver. There, he took his first stab at Shakespeare, directing an all-Italian production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He followed it with *When Did I Meet You?* (the title is a refrain in one of Um Kulthum's songs) which he wrote, directed, and acted one of the three parts. The other parts were played by Egyptian actors; but the artistic team and technical crew were all Italian. I have seen neither; but

if they were anything like his current *Shakespeare* at El-Tali'a, I do not doubt that they impressed and delighted the Italians.

By June 1997 he was back in Egypt and already preparing to venture forth once more upon the high Shakespearean seas. His preparations were thorough; the amount of dramaturgical and theatrical work Galal put into this production – the fruit of a nine-month workshop with a group of amateurs and students – is truly stunning. It shows in the polished training of the seventeen young men and women who make up the cast, their amazing discipline and faultless tempo. It is also palpable in the performance script and conception, in the scenography, and the choice of costumes, lighting, music and sound-effects.

The plays come across not as simplified or reduced Shakespeare, but as the four movements of a symphony on the themes of love and death. To achieve this effect, Galal devised a kind of theatrical shorthand, projecting the plays in brief, rapid scenes that translated chunks of the dialogue into quick, virbant theatrical image. They followed each other at an exhilarating pace, like a video film alternately freeze-framed and fast-forwarded, and only slowing down at the crucial scenes that focused love and death. To further frame those themes, Galal occasionally broke the original order of the scenes, playing them backwards, forwards, or synchronically. Frequently too, particularly in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, he split, doubled, or multiplied the central characters, using movement, voice and gesture, so that at one moment we would be hearing and seeing two, three, or more copies of them going through the motions of the scene alternately or at the same time. Indeed, at some dazzling moments we had as many as what seemed like

fifteen mirror-reflections of Macbeth and his lady, creating the frightful illusion of a nightmarish world peopled only by the likes of them.

Equally exciting was the outer framework within which Galal placed his thrilling variations on love and death. It consists of a prologue, an epilogue and one short interlude at the end of part 1, and features a third-rate theatre company clumsly auditioning for and rehearsing a trite show under the eye of a pompous, pretentious and downright ignorant director. It was the perfect context for Galal and his actors to mock the stock characters and situations of traditional drama and the hackneyed rules and conventions of theatre. After much hilarious squabbling over parts, the actors are ordered to lie down, relax and concentrate on their characters. Instead, they fall asleep. When they rise, they have undergone a transformation, and the plays unfold like a kind of collective dream where the dominant logic is that of dreams.

After *Macbeth*, with its lurid lighting, grisly images and sinister sound-effects, *Romeo and Juliet* seemed positively a breath of fresh air. Coming to us through the eyes of a little school-girl and her boy friend who enact it in their imagination as they read it out of a story book, it substantially gained in comedy and humour, while the tragic end took the form of a series of enchanting tableaux vivants, vaguely reminiscent of classical Italian paintings. The same Italian spirit pervaded *Othello* which was also given as a daydream; but this time the dreamer was a bespectacled, excitable young female student, who as soon as she imaginatively stepped into the world of the play, text in hand, made it her business to prevent the tragedy by physically interfering in the action (getting occasionally knocked about by Othello) and vocally warning the characters. Her comments, actions and asides

were a constant source of mirth. And yet the pathos and sense of tragedy remained.

The last movement was a harrowing *Hamlet* where love becomes a faint grotesque tune drowned by the thunderous laughs of death and the loud rattling of skulls. The chorus here is not a fussy do-gooder, or a romantic school-girl, but a macabre, deranged grave-digger who remains in full sight throughout, watching the characters rapaciously and ready to snatch them off at any moment. The extention to the stage, provided by set-designer Mohyi Fahmi (which consist of two platforms flanking the stage on either side, outside the proscenium arch, with steps leading down to a pit in front of the original stage, below audience level), was used to maximum effect in this part. When Ophelia drowns herself by jumping off the stage into the pit (which is carpeted blue), the grave-digger, who occupies the platform on the left (from the sudience view), pounces on her and drags her up the steps to the grave he has been (almost erotically) digging. She resists, jumps off the platform, this time into the auditorium, not the pit, but he rushes down to drag her once more up the steps.

This gruesome sequence is repeated over and over while at the opposite side one of the three Gertrudes sits mechanically reciting parts of Gertrude's exchanges with Hamlet in the bed-chamber scene. At the sametime, on the main stage, the two other Gertrudes, together with two Claudiuses, two ghosts of King Hamlet, the other characters, and the troupe of itenerant players, obsessively repeat, vocally and physically, snatches of previous scenes at a frenzied pace. This pandemonium is accompanied by wild drumming, eerie howls, and a mad voice-over (Galal's) loudly and tonelessly reciting, over and over,

the "To be" soliloquy. It is a thrilling, haunting scene, superbly conceived, choreographed and orchestrated, and was performed with the fine split-second timing and precision that only the best of experienced professionals can achieve. In its polyphonic structure and impact, it vividly reminded me of the final scene of Peter Brook's *Marat-Sade* when the lunatics at the Charenton asylum run wild and hell breaks loose.

Helping Khalid Galal to make this glorious come-back were Mohi Fahmi (sets), Na'ima Agami (costumes), Mohamed Hussein (sound-effects), and two young wonderful artists who composed and played the live music that accompanied the actors at every step — Amr Darweesh (violin) and Ahmad Sayed (drums). But the burden of the production fell squarely on the young shoulders of the seventeen wonderful young men and women, some of whom are only nineteen and acting for the first time. I left the theatre glowing with hope and was ready to embrace the whole world, rubbish, noice and all.

## A Political Masquerade*

One does not normally think of Moliere in connection with politics, let alone contemporary politics or the Arab-Israeli conflict. To the ordinary Egyptian theatre-goer his name spells mirth, high spirits, the humorous portrayal of human follies and foibles, and the satirical castigation of hypocrisy, avarice, egotism and other moral vices. The more knowledgeable will tell you of his debt to French farce and the Italian Commedia dell'arte, and also of his remarkable, far-reaching and long-enduring influence on English Restoration Comedy and, more importantly, the Arabic theatre.

When I heard that a new production of Moliere's *L'Avare* had opened at the newly refurbished Miami theatre downtown, my mind flew back to the year 1848 which marked the beginning of a new Arab theatre tradition based on the western model. In February that year, Lebanese poet and writer Maron Naqqash (1817-55), who had visited Italy the year before and attended many theatrical and operatic performances there, wrote the first Arabic play in the European sense, directed it himself, drawing on his experience in Italy, and presented it in the form of an operatta on a western-style stage constructed in the garden of his house. The play was inspired by Moliere's *L'Avare* and the author openly acknowledged his debt by calling it *Al-Bakheel* (*The Miser*). The text is preserved, together with two more plays by Naqqash, in *The Cedar of Lebanon* (*Arzat Lubnan*), published in Beirut in 1869 by his brother Nicola, and reprinted in Egypt in 1969 by the National Centre of Theatre, Music, and Folklore.

* 25 March 1999.

Encouraged by the success of *Al-Bakheel* and his second play, *Abu al-Hasan the Dupe* (*Abu al-Hasan al-Mughaffal*), in which he dramatized a story from the *Arabian Nights* involving the Caliph Harun al-Rashid, Naqqash built a theatre next to his home and, with his brother Nicola who also wrote plays, established a repertory company. Like the scripts, the style of staging the plays was deeply influenced by the European theatre. In *The Lebanon : A History and a Diary*, (London, 1860), British traveller David Urquhart, who attended a performance of one of Naqqash's plays in January, 1850, draws attention to the company's efforts to reproduce, down to the smallest, and sometimes unessential details European performance conditions. "The theatre," he notes, "was the front of the house itself; which was exactly what we seek to imitate by our scenes. There was in the centre a door, on each side of it two windows, and two above; the wings were the advanced part of the court with side doors. The stage was a raised platform in front. The audience was in the court, protected by sails spread over. They had seen in Europe footlights and prompter's box, and fancied it an essential point of theatricals to stick them on where they were not required. In like manner they introduced chairs for the Caliph and his Vizir, and cheval glasses for the ladies" who, as he observes, were prominent by their absence : "there were no women on the stage ... none in the court, and not even at the windows which opened on the stage."

Naqqash's plays survived the death of their author in Tarsus in 1855, the failure of his company, the eventual closing down of his theatre and the departure of his brother Nicola, with his son Selim and the troupe, to Egypt. In Egypt, Selim continued to present his uncle's plays (there is a record of a performance by his company of one on 11

February, 1877), and within a few years, they became quite popular with other companies. Between 26 March, 1887 and 9 December, 1919, *Abu al-Hasan* was in the repertoire of eight companies, and *Al-Bakheel* was successively presented by Al-Qabbani troupe (1898), the company of Sheikh Salama Hijazi (1909), the Arab Acting Company (1909), and the Ukasha troupe in 1922 and again the following year. By 1930, however, the popularity of *Al-Bakheel* had waned and it was finally knocked off the boards when popular comedian Ali El-Kassar who wanted to play Harpagon ignored it in favour of *L'Avare* which he adapted for his own purposes. It was not until 1950 that Moliere's original was presented in full, in a faithful translation by Mohamed Masoud, without meddling or interference. Not surprisingly, the director was Zaki Tulaymat who was a strict disciplinarian and a great admirer of the classics. Two more productions followed in the National's 1958-1959, and 1959-1960 seasons, and the latter used a new translation by Sabri Fahmi.

It took Moliere's *L'Avare* nearly forty years to make its way back to the stage. The current production at Miami (the new home of the Comedy state-theatre company) ignores the translator's name and presents an abridged version of the play reset in a mental ward and projected as a zany musical comedy performed by lunatics. For this purpose, new scenes were added at the beginning and end; music, songs and dances were provided to round off certain scenes; the sets, stage furniture and properties were, as in Moliere's day minimal; the costumes had a purely indicative function; the acting style, barring Harpagon, was deliberately exaggerated and affected and generally bordered on open parody; and Moliere, looking emaciated in a ridiculous wig, was dragged in occasionally to comment on the mad

proceedings. He looked like a caricature of the Marquis de Sade in Peter Weiss's *The Persecution and Assassination of Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*.

It seemed to me that director Khalid Galal and his dramaturge and lyricist, Mustafa Selim, had decided to wrench *L'Avare* out of its consecrated niche among the classics and take it back to its crude, vulgar origins, expose the affinities of its characters with the stock figures of farce, and laugh good-naturedly at its stereotyped situations, its lack of development and structural logic, its many loose ends and discrepancies, and its mechanically contrived happy ending. Rather than *L'Avare*, they treated us to a tongue-in-cheek burlesque of it. As such, it held its own against traditional productions of the play and even managed a degree of coherence. While everything on stage and the conduct of the actors heightened the effect of hilarious abandon, Khalid Galal's masterful and carefully controlled performance as Harpagon acted as a stabilizing force and held the show together.

Taken on its own terms as a high-spirited, light-hearted burlesque, the show works admirably and is great fun, but only up to a point. In the penultimate scene (the final in Moliere's text), Galal and his dramaturge suddenly decide to go political : Harpagon, looking more and more like Shylock, becomes identified with Israel, while his son, Cleante, represents the Arabs, and their bargaining and negotiations over Marianne and the cash box are presented, with the help of a microphone bearing Hebrew letters, as a travesty of the Arab-Israeli peace talks. I do not know if Khalid Galal realizes that his treatment of this scene signifies logically that the Arabs are the offspring of the

Israelis. To further punish this new Israeli Harpagon, a last scene is added : it shows Harpagon alone in the dark, embarcing his retrieved cash box, and talking to it passionately as though it were a lover. It vividly recalled the opening scene in Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, where the eponymous hero, the avaricious Venetian, worships at the shrine of his coffers with a pious, quasi-religious hymn. By the time Harpagon drops dead at the end, for no apparent reason, unless, perhaps, his heart gave way under an excess of ecstasy, he has become a patchwork of different characters from different plays – a contrived figure who undercuts the intended political message and makes it ridiculous.

## Colluders in Silence*

The longing for freedom, fulfilment and integration informed Khalid Galal's contribution to the 1999 CIFET – *Colluders in Silence*. Based on Lorca's *Yerma*, it adumbrated the original play, gave the Spanish heroine a contemporary counterpart, and enclosed both, with the other characters, in a gray, grim-looking, round structure, resembling a tomb. At the centre was a frightful iron bench to which the old Yerma remained chained throughout. Dressed in black, or muted colours, the actors looked, in the cold, pale light, like the inmates of a medieval prison or mental asylum – shadowy, tortured figures in a nightmarish vision. If you go to see it expecting to find something of Lorca's play with its haunting mixture of sensuous poetry and tragic passion, you will be sorely disappointed – and also unfair to the show. *Yerma* is projected here through the disillusioned eyes of a sick, frustrated and helpless Egyptian woman who, shut up in a bourgeois home, away from nature, can only experience freedom vicariously through Yerma's rebellion and murder of her husband. It is also projected through the eyes of a generation (Khalid Galal is barely 31) born to a cynical world, bereft of poetry, romance and tragic grandeur.

* September 1999.

# Revisiting Hamlet*

Khaled Galal, who was once an active member of the independent theatre movement, formally announced in 1990, and had his own independent troupe, Encounter, before he was snapped up by the Ministry of Culture, sent to Italy for a year and a half, then put in charge of the state Youth theatre company, has something promising to offer this year's CIFET. With a natural predilection for parody and burlesque, shared by many of his generation, and a knack for vivacious visual effects and lively stage business, he often gravitates to the classics, particularly Shakespeare, producing delicious parodies which rather than denigrate or reduce the originals, reveal a profound admiration and love for them. His earlier *Shakespeare One Two*, which encapsulated four tragedies — *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* — into vivid, brief sketches, like portraits painted with a few, bold brush strokes, was particularly impressive in the *Hamlet* sequence. It was a highly imaginative visual and aural composition which presented the play as one might experience it in a nightmare, with the characters splitting into two or three replicas, then merging or suddenly changing identities, the same scene replayed by different actors, the grave-diggers, no longer clowns, present all the time on stage, the murder of the king replayed in flashes over and over and Ophelia repeatedly dragged screaming to the grave, and all this to the sound of screaming, howling, manic laughter, unearthly groans, clanking chains and echoes of jumbled bits of the dialogue and of Hamlet's soliloquies.

* 30 August 2001.

In the present work, *Hamlet Junction*, Galal reverts to his favourite Shakespearean play, but in a lighter mood, projecting the hero in different ages, ranging from medieval times to the future and in places as widely varied as Denmark and Upper Egypt. It is *Hamlet* seen through the eyes of a group of actors in the present who are not above using music hall numbers and routines, modern dance, cinema, the shadow play, the puppet show and the traditional art of the popular story-teller to present their various readings of the play and views of its hero.

## Shakespeare For Laughs*

Anyone who has had first hand experience of Cairo's sweltering summers knows that, rather than Eliot's unfairly maligned April (whose only sin is breeding "Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing / Memory and desire"), August "is the cruellest month." Its sultry, scorching days, limp and parched evenings and heavy, humid nights are the nearest you can get to a taste of purgatory, minus the hope of expiation. What in God's name then was Khalid Galal thinking of calling his latest production, an abbreviated version of *A Mid-summer Night's Dream* (on at the Creativity Centre, in the Opera grounds, till the end of Ramadan), *A Mid-August Night's Dream*? What a repulsive title, suggesting at once the lurid ravings of a deranged mind in the grip of fever and long, sleepless, steaming and sweat-drenched nights – typical August nights – infested with elusive anxieties, disturbing hallucinations and persistent nightmares.

No wonder I stayed clear of the play when it was first performed for a brief spell last September. But it being Ramadan, a month marked, among other things, by extreme theatrical dearth, and after ten days of not so much as the shadow of a play to be found anywhere, I humbly concluded that, as the old adage says, beggars cannot be choosers. And so, one evening last week, I overcame my August phobia, quelled my deep-seated revulsion at anything remotely reminiscent of that fearful month, and allowed myself to be lured into the elegant, new Creativity

* 21 November 2002.

centre where a huge, colourful poster at the door sported the abhorrent title amid twinkling lights. Two nights later, you could see me at the same venue, laughing my head off at the pranks and antics of the actors.

Though I am quite familiar with Galal's effervescent style of directing and his quizzical, tongue-in-cheek approach to the classics, particularly Shakespeare, whom he adores and keeps revisiting, growing more irreverant and affectionate every time, I never expected to enjoy myself so much. A great champion of the slogan "Shakespeare without tears", he believes that the quickest way to befriend the Bard and the shortest cut to his world lie through good-natured irony, parody and burlesque. In his previous *Shakespeare One, Two*, performed a couple of years ago at Al-Talia', he took on three of the tragedies, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *Othello*, as well as *Romeo and Juliet*, stripping their plots to their bare outlines, galloping through their scenes at break-neck speed, and finishing them off – all four of them – in under two hours. It was a dizzying experience, extremely funny at times and strangely perceptive at others. The speed, the stunning leaps, the torrent of fleeting images and flashing insights, the cinematic fragmentation into significant still frames of certain scenes, and the startling transpositions and surrealistic doubling, trebling and merging of characters in others, left one gasping for breath and feeling thrilled to the bone. It was obviously the work of a young person, for only the young can have such audacity and imaginative daring.

Needless to say, it did not please everybody and positively enraged the deluded, false worshippers of the Bard who insist on regarding him as a snow-bearded sage, locked in an ivory tower, dropping pearls of

wisdom. Galal prefers the image of the lively, jocular actor, the gregarious, worldly-wise man and the master craftsman and entertainer who is not above using burlesque, slapstick farce, bawdy humour and melodrama if it suits his purposes or the mood of his audience. It is from this image that Galal draws courage and inspiration whenever he approaches the revered plays, and it is to them that he owes his belief in the value of dynamic stage imagery and the free-play of both the director's and the spectator's imagination. Those who do not share this belief, or regard any interference with the text as sacrilege, would do themselves a favour if they steer clear of Galal's dabbling with Shakespeare; the liberties he takes with the plays could permanently damage their nerves or, in extreme cases, cause a heart attack. This warning is particularly apt in the case of his current *A Mid-August Night's Dream.*

Judging by what I saw, it was probably conceived one sizzling night last August when Galal's baby girl, his first born Nur, was particularly exasperating and kept him awake. How else could Titania have been reduced to a tiny, swarthy doll, with pink hair, swaddled in a tiny sheet of paper carrying a childish drawing of a forest in one scene, then to a shadow of a formation of squiggles and doodles, cast by the light on the floor of the stage in another? Of the four plots, only two were kept in a drastically abridged form – the lovers quartet and the Oberon-Titania-Puck trio. The third, the Theseus-Hippolyta duet, was completely axed and the fourth – the Bottom and company rehearsal of "The Tragedy of Pyramus and Thisbe" – hovered over the production, like a strong though impalpable presence, informing mood, structure, visuals and overall style.

The Athenian woods, to which Hermia and Lysander escape and are followed by Demetreus and Helena, become an empty, white circle, marked with a string of tiny, coloured bulbs on floor level and bordered, beyond that line, with a wild medley of props and accessories, including a huge number of inflated plastic toys, baby changing-mattresses, a vase of artificial flowers and some tree branches, four outsize feeding-bottles with towering rubber teats, two deck-chairs, a fishing rod, an enormous beach ball and lots of gaily coloured and shiny party hats of the high, conical type. The sight of this empty, white circle, faintly shadowed with shapes of leaves and branches and heaped round with those bright, playful objects puts you in the mood for a party at the outset and you are not disappointed; the performance proceeds as one or, more precisely, unfolds in the same spirit and manner as the mechanics' performance of the tragedy of Pyramus and Thisbe at Theseus' wedding.

The six actors (Mohamed El-Desouqi, Sayed El-Roomi, Mohamed Ali, Asmaa Yehya, Dina El-Saleh and Sameh Hussein), armed with primitive drums, cymbals, castanets and rattles, and impersonating an itinerant company of ham actors, intent on treating or, rather, 'mistreating' us to a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or at least selections of it, make a boisterous entrance. More startling than the noise, however, is their appearance. Dressed like toddlers, in printed cotton dungarees and socks, they wore on their heads fantastic hats and the weirdest-looking multicoloured wigs you can imagine. They lined up on their chairs, on one side of the circle, pouting and waiting for their cues, which the leader pompously announced, not always accurately, by jingling a bell. Alternately, they stepped into the ring, singly or in pairs, bespectacled (as the inept Oberon and

lackadaisical Puck were) or vainly brandishing their mobiles (like the baby lovers), and got down to business in earnest, declaiming some lines, forgetting most, and covering up by extensive, often ridiculously erratic adlibbing, and all the time fiercely hectoring and stage-directing each other.

Time flew as the white circle changed colour, becoming red, blue, green and purple in turn and the actors pranced or scurried around, helping themselves to the varied props, while lisping tattered fragments of the dialogue in between squealing, squabbling and throwing violent tantrums and, generally, making short work of the scenes. For those willing to laugh at Shakespeare, the performance became a wild, rollicking romp through his text on the merry horse of mimicry and a zestful carnival celebration of the spirit of mockery and caricature. The wonder of it though is that despite the stripping down and hacking of the text and all the rough-and-tumble tomfoolery and horseplay, the theme of the transience and fragility of love somehow endured, and was even fleetingly pathetic, and so did the metaphor of the world as a stage populated by ephemeral shadows.

**Tariq Sa’id's**

***Light***

(est. 1990)

# Many-Faced Farfoor*

In his 1964 groundbreaking *El-Farafeer*, Yussef Idris created an authentic image of the typical down-trodden Egyptian and set it on the stage in the memorable figure of *Farfoor*, a theatrical pastiche of the Roman servant, the Italian Harlequin, the Shakespearean Fool and the Qaraqoz of Egyptian puppet-shows. The character also embodied much of Idris's own mercurial personality, impish humour, quizzical musings and, above all, his obsessive sense of the essential theatricality of life.

Idris tried hard, in three subsequent plays, to exorcise his theatrical *doppelganger* and move on to other creations; but Farfoor resisted and persisted. Whenever the dividing line between theatre and life became blurred in the plays, he could be fitfully glimpsed skulking in the shadows or peeping from the wings. In desperation, Idris tuned his back on the stage in the early seventies, devoting himself to fiction and journalism. But Farfoor still dogged him.

In 1984, twenty years after *El-Farafeer*, Idris gave up trying to elude his master-creation and turned round to face him and the stage in a final theatrical wrestle. *El-Bahlawan*, which means at once the acrobat, the rope-walker and the circus clown, is a more openly self-referential work in which the circus becomes a telling metaphor for the world of journalism and where the stagey fabrication called Farfoor masquerades as the editor-in-chief of a top national newspaper, straddling the two worlds and alternating motley with city sartorial elegance.

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* 2 January 1992.

Idris and his Farfoor were the theme of the Light Troupe's *Demi-Rebels*. Director Tariq Sa'id set himself the task of tracing the ubiquitous presence of Farfoor in Idris's fiction and of underlining the relation of the man to the theatrical figment of his imagination. Out of four collections punctuating Idris's career as short-story writer over forty years, he chose eleven stories to illustrate his theme and wove them into an intricate panorama of courage, futility, heroism and absurdity.

*The Language of Pain*, the story which gave Idris's last collection its title, frames the performance at the beginning and end, clearly identifying Idris with Farfoor. The overture carries a poignant, elegiac note. Before a circle of light reveals to us Farfoor dying in the arms of a disciple, a voice rings out in the darkness, asking urgently : "what has broken you, my once upon a time hero?" It is a question that Idris was often asked in his later years and which prompted many a story.

The dramatisation then proceeds not so much to answer the question but to try and expand it into a general questioning of the paradoxes, complexities and contradictions of contemporary Egyptian life. It also attempts to build up Idris, through Farfoor, into an embodiment of contemporary Egyptian consciousness.

In six speedy, extremely economic and original sketches, Farfoor is paraded in many guises and different settings. He is at first a dazed vagabond, gazing wide-eyed at the crazy spectacle of the streets of Cairo, trying to locate himself in the world and make sense of its anarchic medley of sights and sounds. We then see him on the train, an obtrusive, bumptious traveller, cadging professional advice from his fellow passengers and driving them to desperation. (One of them

literally jumps out of the window.) Next, he is a pathetic, ridiculous, simpleminded soldier on a travesty of a battlefield, taking war for a game and becoming a hero by accident. Then he is a worker in a factory, trying to reconcile American and Russian experts and dying in a parodic cowboy shoot-out between the two. The penultimate sketch takes him to prison where he deludes himself with fantasies of female inmates in the next cell and, finally, he assumes the garb of a rural Miles Glorious on the village green and ends up getting a dire thrashing from a husband-battering spouse.

The finale takes us back full circle to the beginning. The dying Farfoor makes his final confession in the circle of light. He never went the whole way in his rebellion but always stopped mid-way; compromise was his bane. He never even allowed himself to give full vent to his anger and frustration. The scene is built out of three stories from three collections spanning Idris's creative career and is managed with great restraint and admirable finesse. No melodramatic twitches here, no sentimental declamations.

When Farfoor slips out quietly and suddenly, as Idris did, his disciple closes his eyes and straightens his body. Then, bending his head, he issues a shattering wail of sorrow and anger. The forbidden language of pain is finally spoken. The circle of light, then, goes out and the actors walk in with candles to march out with the body in a silent, funereal procession and come back, not to take their bows, but to snuff out their candles one by one.

The impact of the show was devastating. It may look at first like a gratuitious sequence of banal events; but on reflection, it reveals the staggering amount of artistic care that has gone into it. The multiple

perspective principle of the overall design and its calculatedly shifting and fragmented look are reflected in the structure of the individual sketches while the disparate episodes are carefully guided towards a final thematic unity and coherence by discreetly planted leitmotifs and echoes. The funeral, the dog, the rose and washing motifs are some. And throughout, a tough-minded sense of humour, deftly shot through with flashes of real sympathy, is maintained despite the barbed, scatter-shot satire.

A production that defies the familiar theatrical typology, was the verdict of many critics. A new modes of perceiving, organising and giving significance to current experience was here foregrounded against the received, stale and exhausted modes. That was the verdict of another critic.

In each episode, the continuity of the narrative discourse was broken up and jolted into jumbled fragments by sudden swerves of tone, meta-theatrical outbreaks, unexpected pauses, freezings and permutations, forming an original type of theatrical ellipsis. There were also the disconcertingly disrupting intrusions of other texts, contexts and unrelated characters. In the street scene, the heroine of a 1950s film strolls across the stage in a bath robe, humming her familiar ridiculous song and drying her hair. The shot synchronises with a funeral procession. As she rubs shoulders with the mourners, they are jolted onto the plane of historical melodramas. In the train scene, the same actress crosses the stage playing hop-scotch; at the factory, she invades the scene with another song and scene from one of the old movies and strolls on later, plucking the petals of a rose in a faint "he loves me, he loves me not" recital. But the most devastating intrusions of all are

when she rushes onto the battle scene, looking for her lost dog (an aping of another 1950s film), or leisurely crosses the village scene, in the final episode, in sophisticated, posh clothes with a long cigarette-holder.

With a group of magnificent actors, amazingly fresh and free of theatrical cliches, especially the stunning Sayyed El-Roomi (Farfoor) and the diligent Ihab Sobhi, director Tariq Sa'id has recovered for us and the stage that long lost magic we call a sense of wonder and has offered an interesting challenge to common theatrical categorisation.

## Spirit of Mirth*

Undaunted by the sweltering heat which has recently engulfed Cairo and the feverish spiral of burning ideological confrontations which have made this June one of the hottest in Egypt for many years, ESTA (The Egyptian Society of Theatre Amateurs) opened their ten-day annual festival at the Puppet theatre on 22 June. The heat, however, in the literal and figurative senses, seems to have caused a total breakdown in communication between the festival and the media. I only heard about the festival four days after it had started and quite by chance. Losing no time, I rushed to Ataba square the following day, braving the heat, the crazy traffic, the screaming cassettes and the raucous hawkers. I curiously wondered what had happened to the Cairo governor's campaign to clean up the area. At the door of the theatre I remembered its atrocious acoustics and scratchy soundsystems. I, nevertheless, braced myself and went in.

I walked into the auditorium just as the lights were dimming and my nostrils were instantly assailed by a heady mixture of oddly matched odours – fetid, rancid and sickly-sweet. Wine, dung, soap and yesterday's roses. I felt I had suddenly stepped onto a bouncing trampouline and, in the dimming light, the packed auditorium looked like a huge, dark mass of restless, sweating humanity. I stumbled to my seat and once there, I started fanning furiously. I soon gave up; the effort was producing more sweat and I meekly reconciled myself to being marinated for one or two hours. I was looking forward to the

* 13 July 1995.

show, knowing full well that laughter and the spirit of revelry can magick away any sense of physical discomfort.

The play of the evening was *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, performed by a group of university students from the Cairo Faculty of Arts and directed by Tariq Sa'id. In 1990, Sa'id founded his Light independent troupe which made its debut in the first Free Theatre Festival that year with *Passers-by*, a hilarious two-hander which he performed with Sayed El-Roomi. And in January 1992, he took the third Free Theatre Festival by storm with his brilliant *Demi-Rebels*, a theatrical free adaptation of six of Yusef Idris's short stories, with Idris's zany Farfoor (from his famous play *El-Farafeer*) stringing them together.* Sa'id is highly imaginative and technically versatile; but I still wondered how, with a crew of young amateurs, he would cope with Shakespeare's fascinating and wild concoction of disturbing cruelty, grotesque romance and rampant parody.

The curtains opened to reveal a lighted empty stage, completely bare except for the black cyclorama. For the rest of the performance there was no change of scene; the bareness persisted throughout, bespeaking the extreme poverty of the budget; the only props used were a baby's two-seater metal swing (for Titania) and a couple of ugly, plastic, white chairs of the cheap type that is depressingly becoming a common eyesore in Cairo's open-air cafes. (They were apparently on loan from the cafeteria downstairs where I had seen many of them).

Our attention was soon diverted from the gaping stage to the back of the auditorium where there was a sudden explosion of exuberant noise. Almost at once, a sprightly bunch of actors, in shiny white

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* See previous review.

mantles, swiftly flitted by on both sides of the auditorium, holding between them an enormous sheet and fluttering it over our heads as they flew down to the stage. It was a rousing start and Sa'id's visual metaphor for the mantle of dreams.

Once on stage, and having dispensed with Puck's prologue, the actors immediately got down to the business of, literally, making short work of the well-known classic. All of the poetry and much of the prose had been blithely hacked away until nothing was left but the play's bare skeleton – and even that was denied the dignity of remaining whole. Many scenes were removed, and those that remained were drastically curtailed, almost summarised in a few quick exchanges, and delivered in colloquial Arabic at a galloping rhythm. "Don't waste time and come straight to the point" seems to have been the guiding policy of the adaptation.

As the scenes rushed by, like fleeting shadows of their former well-padded selves, and the actors rollicked and frolicked on and off stage, I began to suspect that Peter Quince, Bottom, Flute, Snout, Snug and Starveling had overtaken the whole play, with all the parts, and were rehearsing it instead of their original one, "The most lamentable comedy and the most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe". My suspicion deepend at the sight of Oberon, king of the fairies. Fat and jolly, with a big, pale, frizzy wig and a ludicrous crown, he clowned his way through the part, acting fuddled and befuddled while a scrawny, skittish Puck fluttered around him uselessly. Then the graceful Titania got caught in her baby's swing and couldn't get out at her cue and had to be extricated by her one and only fairy. But it was not until Peter Quince declared boldly that, rather than "the most lamentable comedy of

Pyramus and Thisbe", they would rehearse *Macbeth* that my suspicion was confirmed.

Tariq Sa'id's irreverent handling of *A Midsummer* was mirrored and grotesquely parodied in Quince's treatment of *Macbeth*. It was as if the director was mocking himself. Hacking at the text, training amateur actors, having to do without sets, props or proper costumes and coming up with ingenious, if somewhat ridiculous, makeshift solutions, Peter Quince seemed to be taking off Mr. Sa'id. For Quince, Macbeth's "bloody deed" proved an insurmountable obstacle since the ladies of the court could not abide the sight of blood and were bound to be "afeard" of the dagger. But rather than write a prologue to say that Macbeth is not Macbeth "but Bottom the weaver" – as Shakespeare makes Bottom suggest in his version – Quince here goes one up on Shakespeare and decides to bypass the whole problem : there will be no murder to start with. By the time the play is finally performed before the ladies, it has been reduced to one dangling scene. The actors, presenting, or "disfiguring" as Quince would have it, the trees of the great Birnam wood, gang around Macbeth with rigidly twisted, claw-like fingers. Theseus is predictably displeased; but instead of cringing and cowering, Quince clobbers him for his displeasure and orders everybody out. The show is over.

The epilogue, like the prologue was axed and the white sheet swept over our heads as before. Walking out of the theatre, I wondered how Shakespeare would have felt about such a frolic. I was sure, however, that he would have agreed with me that when the spirit of mirth comes in through the door, all critical judgement flies out of the window. He would have also admitted that youth is a truly wonderful thing.

**Abeer Ali's**

***El-Misaharati***

(est. 1992)

## Mirth in Funeral*

It is not unusual to come across scenes of funerals and death rituals in Egyptian plays, particularly those set in the countryside. One example that readily comes to mind is the memorable lamentation scene in Al-Warsha's *Tides of Night* where a group of women, covered in black from top to toe, sit around the corpse of the dead hero, keening and wailing and chanting heart-rending traditional dirges. Abeer Ali's *And No Condolences* (at Al-Hanager), however, is the only play I know which has used the traditional village funeral as both framework, material and source of aesthetic inspiration. It was a daring, risky choice considering the lugubriousness of such occasions and our natural aversion, particularly when we seek entertainment, to any thing that reminds un of our mortality. But the venture paid off, and Ali's funeral came across as an exquisite theatrical experience, "in equal scale weighing delight and dole" – to quote Claudius.

The material, culled from various sources, including *The* (ancient Egyptian) *Book of the Dead*, a collection of traditional elegies and lamentations by Abdul Halim Hifni, a study of folk songs by Ahmed Mursi and another of folk literature by Ahmed Rushdi Saleh, was collectively pieced together, shaped and written by a team of researchers and dramaturges, with Abeer Ali providing the overall conception, writing the final version, stage-designing and directing it. Besides the many folk songs and funerary chants she interwove in her text, Ali also added carefully chosen relevant poems by Foad Haddad, Mohamed

* 10 August 2000.

Bahgat, Amr Ali and Naguib Shihabeddin. The musical element was provided by Mohamed Izzat and Hisham El-Mileegi and they drew heavily on the folk musical heritage, particularly in rural areas. The result was a performance text intensely lyrical, gently nostalgic, cunningly interlaced with earthy humour, and deeply engaged with contemporary Egyptian reality as telescoped through the experience of the various mourners.

Initially, the funeral context and choral lamentations of the female mourners, as they pick up their black mourning clothes out of primitively ornamented wooden chests, suggest a kind of ritualistic drama or an elegiac tragedy in the style of Aeschylus's *The Persians*. But as soon as the mourners begin to talk, exchanging the usual words of consolation, remembering the members of the family who did not turn up for the funeral and discussing those who did, the play moves on to a realistic plane. The seemingly fragmentary, random dialogue offers us in quick, sharp strokes vivid insights into the characters' lives and thoughts, their resentments, disappointments, worries, hopes and broken dreams. Next we move to the male mourners who, like the women, represent different generations, standards of education and walks of life and the revelations continue.

Gradually, these fragments, like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, build a vividly dramatic picture of an ailing, disintegrating parochial society, bristling with destructive tensions and conflicts and hopelessly riddled with greed, materialism, selfishness and moral hypocrisy. The young men among the mourners are frustrated in every respect and doomed to a sterile, futile existence while the young women are either sold in marriage to rich, old men, condemned to a life of self-denial in the

interests of male relatives, or forced to kill themselves if they dare surrender themselves in love.

The play which begins with the anguished mourning of the father, the benevolent head of the family and village, ends with a wholesale condemnation of patriarchy as a life-killing force which turns the women in the play into lonely, frustrated and embittered widows or spinsters, pathetically cradling and lullabying imaginary babies, or into objects for sale or dead corpses. In the final scene, as three coffins, painted with imitations of the Fayyoum Portraits, and the mummies of a young man and woman, with faces painted in the same style, are brought in and all the mourners exchange their weeds for sackcloth, the funeral of the deceased father is ironically and symbolically transformed into the funeral of a society which has unwittingly committed suicide.

To accommodate her relatively large cast (numbering sixteen) and fast flow of images, Abeer Ali opted for extreme simplicity in her set-design, restructuring the stage into different levels and using a few wooden chests, low tables and wicker chairs and, of course, those suggestive imitations of the Fayyoum Portraits. This, with the help of the lighting, allowed her to achieve a kind of cinematic flow and make use of synchronism. Abeer's perspicacity as director also shows in her choice of cast, particularly her actresses who all had marvelous voices – an essential requirement for this kind of show. Hanan Yussef as the deranged mother who becomes unhinged after helplessly watching her daughter forced by the males in the family to drink poison when she lost her virginity before marriage, Minha Zaytoun as the kindly matriarch who fends off her loneliness and growing debility by a few

happy memories, and Nehad Abul 'Enein as the embittered, alienated widow, grimly nursing her grievances — all three gave unforgetable performances without a hint of sentimentality or melodrama. The others, some of them trained singers but acting for the first time, did admirably well.

*And No Condolences* is Abeer Ali's fourth production since she founded her independent theatre group in 1992. She called it El-Missaharati after the title of a volume of poetry by Foad Haddad to whom she is devoted. The word refers to the man who goes about the streets during the fasting month of Ramadan beating a drum to wake the sleepers to eat their *sohoor*, the last meal before the dawn prayers announce the beginning of the fast till sunset. Haddad regarded himself as a kind of *Missaharati* whose role was to wake people up, in the human and political senses, and his poetry was his drum. Abeer Ali regards her art in a similar light and dreams of making theatre that can shake people out of their moral and existential lethargy. Her four productions so far have carried her a long way towards realizing this dream. Carry on Abeer.

**Mohamed Abul Su'ood's**

***Shrapnel***

(est. 1992)

## Such Stuff as Dreams*

Within a week of the end of Tawfiq El-Hakim's *Scheherezade* at Al-Hanager (directed by Gamil Rateb), the Shrapnel independent theatre group has treated us to yet another El-Hakim "drama of ideas" at the same venue. Unlike Gamil Rateb, however, and true to Shrapnel's by now established practice and method, director Mohamed Abul Su'ood (the head and founder of the group) has taken great liberties with the text, dismantling and restructuring it and shedding off in the process a lot of its verbal weight. This artistic policy and imaginative labour produced what amounts to a new text, infinitely more theatrical and relevant, but one which, nevertheless, stands in an exciting and provocative relationship with the original one.

Coming to *Beriaska II and Exodus from Death in Daylight* (as Shrapnel christened the show) without prior knowledge of El-Hakim's *Ahl El-Kahf* (alternately translated *Cave Dwellers* or *People of the Cave* where the heroine's name is Priska not Briaska), the spectator is not likely to encounter any impediments to enjoyment or understanding : the Biblical story is sufficiently familiar and the show has enough audio-visual poetry to make it both eloquent and coherent. Familiarity with El- Hakim's text, however, adds to the thrill of the experience, transforming the show into a kind of post-modernist writing on writing. One gets an exhilarating insight into the workings of Shrapnel's collective mind, of their passionate striving to relocate themselves, as Egyptians, in history and time, to retrieve and relate to those forgotten and neglected areas of the Egyptian heritage, particularly

* 11 May 1995.

the Christian one, and to forge a fresh, vivid and democratic multi-vocal theatrical discourse that embraces cultural diversity and revels in the multiplicity of perspectives and view-points.

It is this particular response to history and culture, to the inherited discourses of the past and to the exigencies of the present, which informs and explains the group's handling of El-Hakim's text and the many alterations they have introduced : the foregrounding of religious persecution and the iconoclastic, daring questioning of all creeds and ideologies and their relation to the dominant power-structures on the one hand and, on the other, to the urgent immediacy of living reality — all the aches and pains the flesh is heir to and all the vague longings and bewildering, impossible dreams of humanity.

In El-Hakim's text, the right of speech, of voicing one's experience and of grappling with the mysteries of reality and time, is granted only to the three cave-dwellers, the pious king of Tarsus, his daughter Priska and her tutor Gallias; the dividing lines between past and present are also closely observed and the comical potential of the collision between two vastly different cognitive frames of reference is fully exploited, particularly in Act Two. The sense of cultural dislocation and of the loss of friends and loved ones remains purely verbal and, in the dialogue, takes the form of thought moulding itself into speech and grappling with a problem.

In *Briaska II*, on the other hand, we do not have dramatic 'characters' in the traditional sense but, rather, shifting consciousnesses, states of mind and varieties of existential sorrow, bewilderment and ecstasy. Abul Su'ood distributed the lines he kept from El-Hakim among six actors and two actresses, and though each

one started off with a dimly defined role (Briaska I, Briaska II, the father, the son, the lover, the shepherd ... etc.), they kept slipping out of them to represent other parts, in other historical periods, and occasionally we would find one part divided among two or three actors. Abul Su'ood also incorporated in his verbal text three stirring modern prose poems (by Ahmed Yamani, Mohamed Metwally and Maher Sabry – all of whom take part in editing the recent daringly outspoken private literary publication, *El-Garad*, i.e. *Locusts*) and combined with them two religious songs from a village in Upper Egypt called Deir Gabal El-Teir (a village which provided the title, setting and theme of Abul Su'ood's previous production and whose name means in Arabic "the monastery of the birds mountain").

The effect of this policy in the composition of the text was the total effacement of the traditional temporal order of past, present and future and the projection of time as a vast, dizzying continuum of constantly shifting and merging points. As the actors keep slipping in and out of different parts and different historical moments, the image of the cave develops into a symbol of time — of all time — while the attempts of the cave-dwellers (represented by all the actors, including the two Briaskas) to break free or transcend its boundaries – through faith, memory, empathy or identification – strike us as painfully ironical and tragically absurd. This is not to say that the prevalent mood of the production is tragic; broad comedy often breaks through the sombre surface in sequences of great hilarity and the general atmosphere, despite the tragic awareness, is predominantly festive and carnivalesque. In the final analysis, *Briaska II* is a defiant celebration of life in the face of death, of art in the face of dogma, and of human love, energy and creativity in the face of the attrition of time. Life,

though it be made of nothing but evanescent moments, transient images, ephemeral passions, baffling paradoxes, vague longings and impossible dreams, is all we have got, and we have to hold on passionately to it, the play seems to say.

This message, however, and indeed the whole structure of meaning in the play, does not reach us through only what is spoken on stage. As with his two previous productions, *The Blind* and *Deir Gabal El-Teir*, Abul Su'ood fashions *Briaska II* out of a subtle and intricate interplay of sound and image, word and music. Here, the sense of shifting temporal perspectives is realized not only through the spoken word, the scene-blocking and the meticulously choreographed movement, tableaux vivants and physical postures (some of which suggested similar groupings and postures in Renaissance painting and sculpture, most notably the *Pieta*); to transmit the sense of a temporal continuum, Abul Su'ood, together with Ihab Abdul Latif (who also worked with Abul Su'ood over the stage design), also put together an ingenious soundtrack with a lot of vocal music from different periods : it included excerpts from Bartok's *27 Choruses*, songs and duets by Moneverdi, a tape of medieval Christmas songs and music, another of English madrigals, some Gregorian chants, a Spanish song – *Hijo de la Luna* (Son of the Moon) – performed in French by the Mecano group, music by the German Kadash group and some spoken lines from an album by Laurie Anderson.

Visually, there was a similar feast on the white back-drop of the stage where slides of many paintings and sculptures were projected. They included the famous *Medusa* head at the Vatican, Caravaggio's

*The Deposition of Christ*, a view of a columned hall in the Vatican, some Renaissance paintings, modern Russian and Spanish sculptures plus some Rodin. At times, the back-drop would be lighted from behind to reveal a huge cross lying on its side, the running shadows of the faithful fleeing their persecuters, or the silhoutte of a seductive woman glimpsed by the cave-dwellers through a crack. The stage image here suggests that the world ouside the cave is not the real world as El-Hakim, following in the footsteps of Plato, seems to suggest in his play. *In Briaska II*, nothing exists outside the cave but shadows, and these are mere reflections of what we see inside.

Apart from the back-screen, with its fascinating, well-calculated and highly evocative flow of images, the set consists of a flight of black steps, back right, which lead up to a small window, high up on the right wall of the stage which is left bare, three rectangular panels on wheels, each deep enough to hold a person, with arched doors and windows, a few square wooden boxes which serve in different capacities and a small, white roman column, front left, with a stand behind it carrying a few candles. This simple but versatile set helped the action to flow smoothly and gave Abul Su'ood ample opportunity to exercise his genius for fascinating lighting effects. As the doors and windows opened and shut, they revealed scenes from heaven and earth, from the past and the present, from memory and the imagination, always emphasising the interrelatedness of human life and history in the continuum of time.

Abul-Su'ood would not have been able to produce this magnificent piece of theatre without the dedicated help of his group who include, apart from Abdul-Latif, the eight actors and the young, poetic trio of

Sabry, Metwally and Yamani, Mohamed Shindi (stage management and publicity) and Mohamed Farouk (production management). The actors, all amateurs though with experience in the university theatre, were confident, competent and sympathetic. They looked well, moved elegantly and struck the right note of feeling. In terms of vocal training, however, they still need to do a great deal and this is perhaps the one single aspect which mars this otherwise thrilling and excellent show.

It remains only to say that *Briaska II* was produced with a budget of under three thousand pounds, put up by Al-Hanager Centre. The extra costs had to be paid out of the pockets of the members of Shrapnel. So *chapeau* to each and everyone of them and, also, *chapeau* to Hoda Wasfi not only for sponsoring them but also for promising to give them a further run at Al-Hanager in July.

# The Riddle of the Skirt*

I cannot pretend that I liked Pinter's *Old Times* much when I first saw it at the Aldwych back in 1971. Despite a very impressive cast – with Dorothy Tutin and Vivien Merchant as the two old friends who meet after twenty years, and Colin Blakely making up the triangle as the former's husband – not to mention the name of Peter Hall who directed, the play seemed to drag endlessly and, as far as I could judge then, quite pointlessly. I suppose I was too young to be moved by the nostalgic mood of the characters and not sufficiently sophisticated to appreciate printer's brand of wit or see the funny side of the sparring match between the husband and his wife's former girl friend. The conflicting reminiscences and contradictory evocations of the past baffled me and the sudden shifts from the present to the past were simply disconcerting. I failed to realize then, as I have since done, that the ambiguity of the action was of the very essence of the play, that Pinter was using the very old and hackneyed dramatic formula of the *ménage à trois* not only to cynically reveal the game of power and domination at the root of most relationships, but also to question the certainty of memory and identity. I came out of the theatre feeling quite stupid and thoroughly exasperated and only cheered up when someone humourously said that if only Deeley, the husband, could remember whose skirt (Kate's or Anna's) he had looked up at a certain party twenty years before, all his troubles, and ours, would be over.

Deeley's pathetic attempt to break into the relationship between the two old friends and claim for himself a foothold in their past takes the

* 25 July 1996.

shape of a story, somewhat crass and vulgar but very funny, which is supposed to prove that he knew his wife's friend in the past. Once, at "someone's flat, somewhere in Westbourne Grove," he says, "you sat on a very low sofa; I sat opposite and looked up your skirt." Anna denies the story and we believe her; but then, towards the end, she mentions in passing that once she secretly "borrowed" some of Kate's underwear to go to a party and only confessed to her later, telling her that she had been punished for her naughtiness because some man had spent the whole evening looking up her skirt. Was that man Deeley ? Was it her skirt he had looked up at Kate's underwear ? Or was it Kate's skirt ?

At the climax of the battle over Kate, Deeley repeats the same story about the party, this time in Kate's presence; then, suddenly, he is not sure : "She thought she was you," he says. "Maybe she was you. Maybe it was you ..." At this point, however, neither the veracity of the story, nor the accuracy of Deeley's memory count for much : the fact that what we call "the past" is a bundle of biased, uncertain and conflicting narratives has been teasingly established; more importantly, the battle between Anna and Deeley over Kate's affection is, as it soon transpires, quite pointless. In a sudden and quite unexpected burst of linguistic energy, Kate, who except for a few desultory and random remarks, had been more or less completely silent throughout, makes it clear that the fight between the two contestants (acrid despite the thin crust of civilized erotic banter) was really pointless : both had lost even before they started. For Kate, Anna and Deeley had been dead a long time ago.

That Pinter when writing the play had in mind a particular, quite well-known triangle – that of Leonard / Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West – is a very plausible proposition which I hope to investigate one day; the settings and characters are simply too close to this literary trio for the matter to be a mere coincidence. But even without this intriguing complication, *Old Times* remains a thorny and treacherous play to stage. The hint at lesbianism which keeps surfacing every now and then makes it even dangerous to stage, given our 'censorial' conditions, and must have been a deterrent to many an aspiring director. In fact, it is amazing how Pinter, who is quite well-known in Egypt, is rarely performed. Except for *The Lover* and the *Dumb Waiter*, both produced by Al-Warsha troupe and directed by Hassan El-Gretly, there is no record of any productions of his plays. This makes Mohamed Abul Su'ood's venture at Al-Hanager all the more valuable. He gives us the two acts of *Old Times in toto*, in amazingly elegant and eloquent Egyptian Arabic (thanks to Mohamed Metwally's translation) and with an amazingly talented young cast.

Pinter's stage directions regarding set and movement were generally strictly followed but some alterations were made in the interest of relevance. Writing in 1971, Pinter made his characters reminisce about the London of the 1950s. In 1996, at the age of twenty-five, Abul Su'ood could not reach further back than the 1960s; so, instead of the 1950s tunes, we had the Beatles, and rather than *Odd Man Out*, the film that brings Deeley and Kate (or was it Anna ?) together and figures prominently in his recollections, we have Jean-Luc Godard's *Vivre Sa Vie*. The 'fleapit' of a cinema Deeley remembers is recreated by means of a screen on which shots of the film are projected. In the second half (the two acts of the play are played straight through with no interval),

these are replaced with footage of Anna (Sherine El-Ansary) and Kate (Manal Youssef) dressed in each other's clothes and conversing happily on a bed, and of Deeley (Khaled El-Sawy) walking in repeatedly through the big French window, which frames the stage at the back. Through the window, on a pale backdrop, the lighting (designed by Christoph) reflected the moods of the characters in sensitive shades.

The three young actors did a very good job with a very difficult and tricky text – made all the more trickier by the director's insistence on playing up the lesbian potential of the relationship between the two old flatmates. Khaled El-Sawy, in particular, who, like Pinter, is both an actor and a playwright, gives a memorable, virtuoso performance, and the audience who flock nightly to Al-Hanager adore every minute of it.

## Which is Which ?*

Written in 1952, at the height of the McCarthy witchhunt, *The Crucible*, which Miller based on the court records of the Salem witch-trials of 1692, had its world premiere in 1953 at the Martin Beck theatre in New York; it proved an instant hit and ran for 197 nights. Three years later, in 1956, Miller was called before the Congress Committee on Un-American Activities. On his choice of theme he has written : "I was drawn to this subject because the historical moment seemed to give me the poetic right to create people of higher self-awareness than the contemporary scene affords."

For decades, the contemporary scene in Egypt, indeed all over the Arab world, has needed the kind of awarenss that Miller so forcefully dramatizes in this play. That it was never performed anywhere in the Arab world before last week is perhaps understandable and quite logical : the 1950s saw the rise of military dictatorships and as soon as they began to crumble, religious bigotry and fanaticism reared its ugly head. The recent hysterical reaction of the media against the so-called followers of the 'Satanic cult', or disciples of Satan, is a frightening reminder that the witch-trials of Salem may not be as safely distant and buried in the past as we would like to think. The current production of *The Crucible* at Al-Hanager, however, was not a direct result of that deplorable mass hysteria.

The idea of the project started two years ago when Huda Wasfi, Al-Hanger's artistic director, watched the play while on holiday in

* 1 May 1997.

Europe. As soon as she came back she commissioned Mohamed Abul Su'ood to direct it. The production took two years to perpare and until last week, when it opened, it had not yet reached its final shape. Abul Su'ood speaks of this initial short five-day run as a series of open dress rehearsals intended to test the production on the public and frankly admits that he will need at least two or three more months to sift through the masses of material he crammed into the work, decide what to keep and what to chuck out, streamline the work generally and give it a better focus.

The general reaction to this first viewing was that the work was thrilling and provocative in its audio-visual conception, but far too long (over four hours) and somewhat rambling and diffuse. One could clearly see that the director had started with one project but somewhere along the line lost direction and strayed into another. He had initially intended to follow in his treatment of Miller's text the same method and artistic strategies he had used with success in a previous production of Tawfiq Al-Hakim's famous play *The Cave-Dwellers*. In that earlier production he had taken the play apart, discarded some scenes, added new elements and rearranged the whole thing to make it a vehicle for his own understanding and interpretation of the old legend. The result had been a rich and brilliant mosaic of poetry, dance and music.

In the present experiment, the *Crucible* proved a harder nut to crack. The initial movement and dance sequence (designed by Abul Su'ood with breath-taking lighting by Ihab Abdul Latif), together with the series of slide-projections of paintings by Hieronymus Bosch, Breughel, Raphael and Magritte, among others, and the musical collage

(which includes music by Prokofiev, Jean-jacques Lemetre, Rene Aubry, the Kadash group, songs by Billie Holiday, as well as some Gregorian chants, church music and Scandinavian songs) suggest a frame of reference which is timeless and combines the legend of Faust, the temptation of Eve, John Fowles's novel *The Magus* and the Persian Zoroastrian dualistic religion. This exciting framework, however, soon pales out as we plunge headlong into the play and are treated to practically the whole of the first act, performed in a stark naturalistic style that contrasts disconcertingly with the expressionistic mode of the opening sequence. It is true that some of the themes suggested in this sequence occasionally surface in the course of the show, but by the time we have reached the end of act two of Miller's slightly preachy and wordy text, they tend to look like pointless intrusions and useless, distracting addenda. Indeed, as the show progressed, the almost constant presence of Hani El-Mettinawy as the devil, in a black and red cape, in the background, watching the drama from a suspended high platform while coolly smoking a cigarette, became silly, childish and quite ridiculous.

What Abul Su'ood will need in the next few months, in the light of this trial run, is to look long and honestly at his work, make some difficult choices and ruthless excisions and decide finally whether he wants to do Miller's play as he wrote it or revise and reverse its traditional interpretation and the author's point of view. It is obvious from the production that Abul Su'ood is all out against any kind of witch hunt and has a real terror of religious fanaticism. But it is also clear that he has little sympathy with John Proctor's treatment of Abigail Williams, or with his wife's stuffy, puritanical, priggish and

self-righteous attitude. To complicate matters further, he works into his production Miller's printed footnote on what happened to the real historical personages after the trials, particularly Elizabeth's marriage after the hanging of her husband, John Proctor, and Abigail's taking up prostitution as a career.

This vascillating, confused attitude to the characters affected the performances of the actors negatively so that they seemed to be fighting among themselves for the sympathy of the audience rather than cooperating to make a coherent impact. This does not mean that there were not some excellent and quite powerful individual performances, particularly in the case of Nora Amin (as Abigail), Khaled Al-Sawi (as Proctor), Mu'taza Abdul Saboor (as Titupa), Hani El-Mettinawy (as Simon Magus and Lucifer), Mohamed Farouk (as the town's clown and doll-maker) and the vibrant Hamada Shousha who is fast developing into a really versatile and charismatic actor.

Abul Su'ood's version of *The Crucible* (rechristened *The Left Foot of Night*, which in Egyptian lore refers to the approach of evil, entering a place with the left foot being a bad omen) is an ambitious and daring theatrical experiment with a magnificent potential. All it needs is some pruning to allow its intrinsic beauty to shine through. Luckily, Abul Su'ood is working on this right now and, hopefully, when the work reopens in autumn it will have shed all the debris and dead wood.

## At the Edge of Being*

At 27, with 7 highly provocative productions already on his CV – *The Blind*, *The Monstary of Birds Mountain*, *Briaska II*, Pinter's *Old Times*, Miller's *The Crucible*, Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba*, and, finally, Bond's *Lear*, currently on at Al-Hanager – Mohamed Abul Su'ood is perhaps the most original, exciting, adventurous, and passionately dedicated director of his generation. With no formal training in theatre (he read philosophy at university), he is blissfully free of the timidity of professionals and their cliches. He will never play it safe, and will try anything; and naturally, this can be disasterous sometimes. But even his failures are moving, impressive and curiously refreshing – like failed expeditions to the peaks of the Alps or the poles. If a production of his misfires, you can be sure it will do so with a glorious bang. *The Crucible* was one such grand failure. The conceived structure was simply too colossal and he did not have enough professional cement to hold it together; it collapsed with a magnificent crash, leaving behind a treasure of priceless relics. Ultimately, it was much more exciting and rewarding than the more compact, successful *Old Times*.

Though a voracious reader in general and insatiable consumer of plays (he sometimes buys books in languages he does not speak in the hope that somehow he will be able to make sense of them), the shaping influences on Abul Su'ood's art are painting, music and European cinema. He is enamoured of medieval and church music, especially Gregorian chants, and many of his stage imagery are inspired by the

* 3 June 1999.

painings of Rodin, Hieronymus Bosch, Giotto, Rembrandt and Pieter Bruegel. More often than not, the starting point for a production is a group of images and sounds that attach themselves to a particular subject or some nebulous idea or a strong feeling. Then the hunting for a text that can mediate them begins, and if after going through dozens of plays he finds none that suits, Abul Su'ood will sit down and write his own script, often combining many sources in the form of a collage. Processing the tentative script into an integral audio-visual conception follows, and at this stage Ihab Abdul Latif's collaboration is indispensable. The two work closely together for weeks, sometimes months, talking, sketching, arguing, listening to dozens of tapes and poring over art books. They do it mostly in cafés, and when they were preparing *Briaska II* they found their way to my cosy and modestly-priced little café in Muhandiseen and for three months were a permanent fixture there.

Dropping there one morning for a quick coffee, I found Abul Su'ood slumped on a table across an art book and heaps of scribbled papers and sketches. The waiter told me he had spent the whole night there and that Ihab had left him at four in the morning. It was then that I learnt that Abul Su'ood had left the family home because his father, a well-to-do textile merchant, objected to his pursuing a career in theatre and wanted him to join him in the business. For a make-shift home he took over a deserted flower stall (formerly a gate-keeper's hut) in the derelict garden of the shut-down house of an old aunt in Nasr City. As resourceful in life as in the theatre, the frequent allusions to Abul Su'ood's "hut", "shack", and "hideout", which I had taken for a joke, were after all true.

Rehearsal time is the happiest for Abul Su'ood and he would stretch it as long as the actors would tolerate, and even beyond their tolerance. Some leave after months of rehearsals in despair of the show ever coming out and he is often accused of unprofessionalism on that score. "If it were up to me," he told me once, "I would be rehearsing for ever. The rehearsals are the work", he added; "once they are over, I am not interested. Opening nights don't excite me".

Another thing that maddens the actors who work with him is what the professional ones call his "lack of method" and what one amateur actress eloquently expressed as "he never tells you what he wants; he only objects and asks you to try once more, and it goes on and on." Other directors, like the famous Roberto Ciulli (who was honoured by CIFET last year), not to mention Peter Brook, would call this allowing the actor to be creative.

Recently, during the Oman Festival, Ciulli told a group of actors and directors that most professional actors want to be treated as morons and robots. "Personally, I never *direct* actors," he said. "I design the movement, yes, and the spatial placing on stage, but I never tell them, or show them how to act a part. It would be me acting then, not them, and it would be boring and repetitive. I act as their audience," he said; "I tell them what is good and they should keep and what they should chuck out. For me direction is a process of choice, exclusion, refinement and orchestration. And, of course, giving the actor the best possible frame," he concluded. I guess Abul Su'ood is following very much in the footsteps of Ciulli without knowing it. Although he watched his stunning production *Pinocchio-Faust* which visited Cairo last year and camped at the hotel where the company (Theatre an der

Ruhr) stayed all the time they were there, making friends with the actors (luckily he speaks German), I do not think he had the chance to talk to Ciulli about artistic matters.

I went to the opening of *Lear* in great excitement and trepidation. Excitement, because I am always fascinated by the images Abul Su'ood and Ihab Abdul Latif come up with and they have never failed to surprise me. Trepidation, because this *Lear* is not a *pleasant* play (Bond's plays rarely are); it gives us all the horrors and atrocities of Shakespeare's *Lear* (multiplied tenfold) with none of its poetry and dignified suffering. The image of human history as a senseless, sinister, and brutal game of mutual homicide, even if true, is projected here with almost sadistic, vindictive relish in the scenes of carnage; and in the presence of Bond's high-pitched, crude moralizing (which conjures up images of hysterical preachers, frantically waving hell-fire), it occasionally pitchs into the vulgarly obscene. And with all the macabre stories of genocide, massacres and mass graves, as well as the harrowing images issuing from the Balkans and delivered to our doors post haste every morning with the papers or jumping at us off the T.V. screen at the touch of a button, I wondered if I could take more. As an artist, and a youngman, Abul Su'ood has every right of course to hold up the mirror to humanity and show how ugly and irredeemably damned it has become. To my question why Bond's *Lear*, he answered : "with all the violence around me, it is the only play I can do now; and I want to do it because it is ugly, grotesque, and cruel."

Well, he did; and magnificently, I am glad to say. And though he compressed all three acts in two hours without intervals, I survived it, thanks to the sustaining force of art. It was Abul Su'ood's biggest

challenge after the *Crucible*; but hand in hand with Ihab Abdul Latif, they managed to avoid all the pitfalls of the former production and come up with a taut, quick-paced, well-integrated and competently acted performance. The sensitive lighting, the bold and simple stage-design — all metal and wood — the blend of shiny and muted colours, the intricate and highly evocative sound-track and the well-thought out movement configurations all combined to create a palpable, eerie, dreamlike atmosphere which enveloped the play, lending unity to its highly episodic structure, and softening the brutality of the action without making it less shocking. This kind of stage poetry is crucial to a play like *Lear*, and contrary to my expectations, the final effect was cathartic more than anything else. Eminently well worth seeing, even if you have a weak stomach.

# Enchanting Abandon*

Of the many kinds of authors, the most irritating is the gifted author-critic. As a professional critic, I know of nothing more frustrating, indeed devastating, than to have my job done for me and to have it done in such a brilliant manner that makes me green with envy and forces me to begrudgingly admit that I could never surpass it. Czech writer Milan Kundera is one of the top of this category of authors. His *Introduction to a Variation*, printed in the 1985 Harper and Row english edition of *Jacques et son Maitre* (written in Prague in 1971 and published in French ten years later), is a masterpiece of creative critical writing. It begins in the intimate tone of a personal recollection, taking for a starting point the deep financial straits the author found himself in after the Russian occupation and subsequent banning of his books. Despite his need, he turns down an offer to do a stage adaptation of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, not as an anti-Russian reflex, but because "Dostoevsky's universe of overblown gestures, murky depths, and aggressive sentimentality" repels him. By comparison, Diderot's *Jacques le Fataliste* (1773) seems a "feast of intelligence, humour, and fantasy" and he suddenly feels "an inexplicable pang of nostalgia" for the universe it depicts and an instinctive need to breathe deeply of its post-Renaissance spirit.

Trying to understand his sudden aversion to Dostoevsky at the time, Kundera recalls an encounter with some Russian infantrymen in the contryside on the third day of the occupation. They stopped his car,

* 23 March 2000.

searched it, then the officer who had ordered the search asked him without the slightest hint of malice or irony how he felt and added candidly : "You must realize we love the Czechs. We love you." The horror of this grotesque, irrational declaration of love in the midst of the ravaged countryside, overrun by thousands of tanks, leads to profound insights into the danger of elevating feelings to the rank of values, criteria of truth and justifications for kinds of behaviour. Indeed, as he puts it : "The noblest of national (and, I would add, religious) sentiments stand ready to justify the greatest of horrors, and man, his breast swelling with lyric fervor, commits atrocities in the sacred name of love." In other words, When feelings supplant rational thought, they become the basis for an absence of understanding, for intolerance; they become, as Carl Jung has put it, 'the superstructure of brutality.'

Tracing the genesis and malignant growth of this lethal "superstructure" in Western civilization (to which it is by no means confined), Kundera arrives at the Renaissance and celebrates its "spirit of reason and doubt, of play and the relativity of human affairs". It is the spirit which informs *Jacques le Fataliste*, as he sees it, and puts it in the company of and on a par with such novels of true grandeur as *Don Quixote*, *Tom Jones*, *Ulysses*, or, indeed, Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Diderot's great model. The rest of the *Introduction* is taken up with astute reflections on the novel as an art form and its unexplored possibilities, on the differences between *Tristram Shandy* and *Jacques le Fataliste*, on the difference between making adaptations of existing texts and creating new variations on them (Diderot's novel is classed as a variation on *Tristram Shandy* and Kundera's play as a variation on his variation), and, finally, on the structure, or "architecture" as he calls it, of the play.

Throughout one is constantly and vividly reminded of the great Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin, particularly his two seminal books on the novel, *The Dialogic Imagination* and *Rabelais and his World.* Indeed, at certain points, Kundera seems to be echoing Bakhtin's definition of the novel as a force, "novelness", rather than a genre, and of its language as heteroglossia, or infinitely fragmented languages in battle with each other. Adopting as artistic criteria Bakhtin's concepts of the polyphonic novel (of the novel as the "maximally complete register of all social voices of the era"), of the dialogic principle which undermines the hegemony of any one single discourse, relativizing and de-privileging it, making it aware of competing definitions of the same thing, and of the carnivalesque, or carnival laughter, as a liberating energy and a force which serves to subvert ossified hierarchies and stale judgements, Kundera rates Diderot's novel over its English model. Whereas "*Tristram Shandy* is the monologue of a single narrator, ... Diderot uses five narrators who interrupt one another to tell the novel's stories" (which all consist in dialogue) in the form of dialogue, so that the novel as a whole "is nothing but a big, noisy conversation." Besides, while "Sterne's book is a compromise between the spirit of freethinking and the spirit of sentimentality, a nostalgic memory of Rebelaisian revelry in the antechamber of Victorian modesty," as Kundera puts it, "Diderot's novel is an explosion of impertinent freedom without self-censorship, of eroticism without sentimental alibis."

Commenting on Bakhtin's concept of "carnival laughter", a critic once said : "You could read all of Bakhtin as an extended, dialogic footnote to Heraclitus and to his various reincarnations : Menippus, Cervantes, Sterne, Gogol, Diderot and, especially, Rabelais." And in

constructing his "variation-homage" to Diderot in *Jacques and his Master*, Kundera was inspired by those "reincarnations" and contributing, perhaps consciously, his own extended, dialogic (and elegiac) footnote at a time when the spirit they celebrated in their works was crushed by Russian tanks, when the carnival turned bitter and masters and servants of the Don Quixote and Sancho Panza type gave way to Vladimir and Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky on the empty stage of the world in *Waiting for Godot*.

Kundera's technical description of his play cannot be bettered : "On the fragile base of the journey of Jacques and his master rest three love stories : of the master, of Jacques, and of Madame de La Pommeraye. While the first two are loosely connected with the outcome of the journey, the third, which takes up the entire second act, is from the technical standpoint purely and simply an episode (unintegrated as it is into the main action); it is an obvious infringement on the laws of dramatic structure. But that was where I made my wager," he says. To unite the stories into a coherent whole while renouncing strict unity of action, he used the technique of polyphony, whereby the stories are intermingled rather than told consecutively, and the technique of variation which makes each of the three stories a variation on the others. "And so," he concludes, "this play which is a variation on Diderot is simultaneously an homage to the technique of variation, as was, seven years later, my novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*."

In the play, the technique of polyphony is obvious in the constant intrusion of one story on another, the interupption of one narrative line to accommodate another then picking it up again, and, especially, in the device of conducting two separate dialogues, belonging to two different

stories, simultaneously, as in scene 5 of Act One. And though the technique of variation is equally obvious, Kundera is careful to draw attention to it explicitly in the dialogue. In the first act, Jacques twice repeats : "Our adventures, Master, seem strangely similar," and in Act Three the Master says : "You know what I wondered yesterday evening as I listened to the story of Madame de La Pommeraye. Whether it isn't always one and the same story. After all, Madame de La Pommeraye is merely a replica of Saint-Ouen (the friend who gulled him, sneaked into the bed of his beloved Agathe, fathered her bastard son and forced him by a ruse to provide for him), while I am no more than a version of your poor friend Bigre (whom Jacques gulled, sleeping with his beloved, Justine, and giving her a child whom Bigre believes to be his own), who himself is but a counterpart of that dupe of a Marquis (the Marquis Des Arcis whom Madame de La Pommeraye tricks into marrying a whore out of revenge). And I see no difference whatever between Justine and Agathe, and Agathe is the double of the little whore the Marquis eventually married."

Like the technique of variation which also features as a theme in the play's structure of meaning, the question of rewriting or adapting old texts crops up in the dialogue as a theme in the Master's open references to Diderot who first conceived them as characters, equipped with horses for their journey, and to Kundera who rewrote them (albeit in a variation) in a stage play where they cannot have horses. Kundera gets a curse for his pains when the Master cries out : "Death to all who dare rewrite what has been written !... Castrate them and cut off their ears !" But then, even the grand author of the book of life himself, of "what is written on high", as Jacques puts it, does not escape criticism and shafts of irrevernt humour. When the Master kills his treacherous friend

in a duel and Jacques is arrested in his place, Jacques cries out : "The stupidities written on high ! Oh, Master, he who wrote our story on high must have been a very bad poet, the worst of bad poets, the king, the emperor of bad poets !" And when he is fortuitously saved by the sudden, deus-ex-machina-like arrival of Bigre, the friend he duped, he is overcome with laughter and exclaims : "Here I was, telling off a bad poet for being such a bad poet, and what does he do but quickly send me you to correct his bad poem. And I tell you, Bigre, even the worst of poets couldn't have come up with a more cheerful ending for his bad poem !" Indeed, the whole of history, as Jacques, the earthy philosopher, remarks at another point, is made up of bad poems, rewritten over and over so that no one knows anymore who they are or what the original poem was like.

This delightfully cheeky, refreshingly irreverent, robustly erotic and daringly skeptical text (which is also warm-hearted, genially tolerant of human folly and sadly cognizant of the shortness of life, its underlying loneliness, many thwarted dreams and unfulfilled longings) could not have been performed in Egypt anywhere else but at Al-Hanager. Only a person of Huda Wasfi's integrity, faith, and courage could have risked it, or fought as hard to defend it against the hysterical swords of the censors. It was given in a smooth, accurate and eminently actable colloquial Arabic translation by Mohamed Metwally, sensitively and lovingly directed and designed by the prize-son of Al-Hanager and Wasfi's special protégé, the surprisingly gifted Mohamed Abul Su'ood (with his closest artistic associate Ihab Abdul Latif as executive director), and superbly acted with zestful panache and subtle finesse by the members of his Shrapnel troupe. The talented, technically versatile and highly disciplined cast included : the dark and

puckish, lithe and blithe, Mohamed Farouk as Jacques; the innocent looking, gracefully tall and willowy, Hani El-Mettinawy as his Master; the smouldering, demonic, and wonderful parodist Hamada Shousha as Saint-Ouen and also, in drag, as the old prostitute in the story of Madame de La Pommeraye; the sweet Rihab Ali as both the daughter of the old prostitute and Justine with whom Jacques loses his virginity; the elegant and impressive Yasmin El-Naggar as Agathe and the innkeeper who enacts the part of Mme de La Pommeraye while she tells her story, constantly slipping in and out of the part; the handsome Mohamed Nassar as le Marquis Des Arcis; the deliciously marionette-like Mohamed Abu Yusef as Agathe's father and Old Bigre; Ibrahim Ghareeb, who made the naive and credulous Young Bigre seem endearingly like a figure fresh out of a comic strip; and Ahmad Gameh who adequately doubled as the officer who arrests the Master, then Jacques, and the waiter at the inn.

Abul Su'ood humbly and lovingly surrendered himself to the text, putting aside his passion for exuberant visual and sound effects and strictly obeying the author's stage directions. He presented a stage without scenery, as Diderot had done in his novel, and Kundera instructed in his play. The costumes and minimal props were neutralized and did not indicate any particular period or specific place — only vaguely somewhere in France, sometime in the past. Even Kundera's division of the bare stage into two main areas, a downstage one for the action taking place in the present and a raised upstage one. in the form of a large platform, for the episodes from the past, with a staircase in the far background leading to an attic, was obeyed. In the area of acting, however, Abul Su'ood allowed himself some freedom, occasionally going against Kundera's injunction to avoid exaggeration,

and injecting into the performance controlled doses of parody and caricature. One consequence was that the huge female posteriors the Master obsessively imagines and talks about kept perceptibly growing until they became grotesquely overblown, gaining metaphysical dimensions. This did not harm the play and actually helped to draw the audience into its world and bring it closer to theirs. In any case, this deeply provocative and highly enjoyable production was the best reception Kundera could have had in Egypt.

# The Lady of Secrets*

Shrapnel's latest production, *Phaedra*, or *The Lady of Secrets* (originally, *Meta-Phaedra*), is a new anti-patriarchy, anti-US reading of the old Greek myth in which the father is a vain philanderer who, in one thunderous, megalomaniac harangue, identifies himself as the sole, super, mightiest and richest power in the world. Unlike king Theseus in the myth or in Euripides's *Hippolytus*, he dies while away from home; but just as Phaedra, who chafes at the marriage bit and finds him thoroughly disgusting, is about to breathe a sigh of relief, he pops up again, like the poverbial bad penny, on a short leave from the underworld to punish her and his son. Phaedra kills herself with poison not out of fear, shame, or guilt, but, rather, because she finds life with the likes of her husband in charge unbearably dull and boring. As for the son, Hippolytus, rather than have Poseidon, the Greek god of the sea, destroy him on the father's orders as happens in the myth, Mohamed Abul Su'ood leaves the audience to decide his fate. Opening with funerary rites and a quote from the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, asking them to rise for the final judgment, the play ends with Phaedra's old nurse, presented as a clairvoyant, asking the audience, having listened to the characters innermost thoughts, to give their verdict by offering each member, in turn, a choice between a dagger and a candle.

Though deeply rebellious in outlook and intent (subversive, some would call it) and, by Egyptian standards, shockingly outspoken about

* 30 August 2001.

sexual passion and flagrantly iconoclastic about marriage and the family structure, Abul Su'ood's *Meta-Phaedra* is very poetic and lyrical. Made up of a string of internal monologues, or soliloquies, interspersed with the nurse's comments and incantations, it has no dialogue in the real sense. But as the monologues rise and ebb, flow in and recede, intersecting, overlapping and counterpointing each other, a subtle dramatic tension of the kind we experience in music is generated and delicately builds up to the rhythm of the sea. Visually absent from the set, the sea is nevertheless vividly evoked in the text and its pervasive presence (a clear throwback to the legend and to Hippolytus's horrible death on the rocky shore) lends a sombre atmosphere to the setting, like an enveloping sense of doom, constantly sounding a tragic note in the background.

Though time and place are left deliberately vague, the characters keep their original Greek names, which link them firmly to the past, while making pointed references to the present : *Hades*, or the underworld, exists side by side with McDonald's, Marlboro cigarettes and coffee machines. The performance soundtrack, arranged by Tamer Said from a number of CDs provided by the author, including the Kurdish *Astrakan Café* by Anouar Brahem, the French *N'oublie pas*, by René Aubry, Japanese music by Kitaro Moudilla, and Indian music by the Supramaniam troupe, as well as music from North Africa, is equally ambitious, encompassing many cultures and ages, and is quite fascinating in an eerie sort of way. As a director-turned-playwright, Abul Su'ood has been wonderfully thorough, scripting the movement, music, set and props in his text, down to the smallest detail.

While such texts which seem to cover every aspect of the performance usually incense directors, making them feel redundant, Hani El-Mettenawy, a gifted actor and dancer who has worked with Abul Su'ood for many years, helping him found and run his Shrapnel independent theatre troupe and starring in many of his productions, seems happy enough to follow the author's instructions in his debut as director. But this is far from being slavish following; it is, rather, an instance of deep affinity, mutual understanding and shared sensibility, bolstered by years of working and fighting together to create the kind of theatre they like.

With a strong cast, featuring Nora Amin as Phaedra, Hanan yusef as the nurse, Mohamed Shindi as Theseus and Hani El-Metennawy as Hippolytus, an effective colour-scheme ranging from cream to brown and exploding into deep wine-red in Phaedra's revealing dress, an austere economy in props and an intimate set (by Ibrahim Ghareeb), shared by the actors and audience, and consisting of a small room with dark walls and only one door and one window for openings, *Meta-Phaedra* is likely to prove a rich, provocative and emotionally charged experience. But if you decide to go, try to be there in plenty of time before the show starts, since Phaedra's room can only accommodate 60 spectators at a time.*

* See also the last two pages of the section entitled "Slowly but Surely" in Part I.

## Like to a Bubbling Fountain*

Unless deliberately staged as a hilarious parody of the kind of gross revenge drama initiated by the Roman Seneca and sedulously aped by many Elizabethan writers, *Titus Andronicus* is not a play any sane person would want to watch nowadays or find easy to stomach. T.S. Eliot called it "one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written", while others, including Dr. Johnson, Hazlitt and Coleridge, denied Shakespeare's authorship of most of the text or tried to absolve him completely of any complicity in it. Sadly, however, since it was included in the 1623 Folio collection of the plays by Heminges and Condell, two of Shakespeare's closest friends and professional colleagues for over twenty years, and in view of strong counter arguments by other scholars and commentators, one is reluctantly persuaded to accredit it the Bard.

Assuming it is Shakespeare's, as Peter Brook did when he staged it at Stratford during the 1955-56 season – in his "theatre of cruelty" phase – (with Laurence Olivier in the title role), one has to face the fact that of his thirty seven plays it is the crudest, goriest and most abhorrently violent. Its slaughterhouse atmosphere and abundant horrors – "almost comically frequent", as someone observed – might have delighted the Elizabethan groundlings and drew them in hordes; but to a modern audience, unless it is looking for cheap thrills and chills, it would probably seem a silly blood-and-thunder old shocker, crammed full of unnatural deeds, with next to no saving graces in terms

* 15 May 2003.

of characterization, style or ethos Brook's production, as one critic, Richard David, noted in 1957 was so calculatedly shocking, it "sent some spectators off into faints before ever a throat was cut". Its final effect, however, as he admits, "was a conviction, unsought but growing irresistibly as the play proceeded, that this piece on which so much labour and ingenuity had been lavished ... was twaddle."

Twaddle or grotesque melodrama, the play unfolds as a string of gratuitous sensational incidents, among them : adultery, multiple rape coupled with savage maiming, the repeated severing of heads and lopping off of limbs, an attempted infanticide, the killing of a son and daughter by their father and murder galore. There are also scenes of madness where the hero raves and rants and, for good measure, this gruesome farce ends with a horrible banquet in which a mother feeds on the zealously baked and carefully-garnished flesh of her two sons. The characters involved in these grisly, nauseating proceedings are either exulting human devils or weeping, puppet-like victims, and despite all their glib talk of nobility and honour, the system of moral values which governs their world is mainly based on brute force, martial prowess and primitive blood rituals.

Even the nominal protagonist is a mere stereotype and not even an attractive one. Indeed, Titus is the most unsympathetic hero Shakespeare ever loosed on the audience and set to strut and fret on the boards – a rigid, irascible, old warrior, prompously jingoistic and barbarously cruel. In the first scene he boasts that out of the twenty five sons he has fathered, twenty-two were sacrificed for the military glory of Rome (think of their poor mother), and before the scene is out, he has had a war prisoner killed in front of his mother (the captive queen

of the Goths, Tamora) in a brutal religious ritual (an act which she rightly describes as "cruel, irreligious piety") and stabbed to death one of his remaining three sons because he dared oppose his will. Not to mention his putting a villain on the throne of Rome out of blind subservience to tradition and handing over to him his only daughter against her will and despite the fact that she is betrothed to another. Such a character deserves what he gets, and he gets ruthless, vengeful Tamora and her vicious lover Aaron who re equally grotesque. None of the characters – not even the raped, maimed Lavinia – arouses so much as a shred of sympathy and, in the reading, as the enormities and atrocities pile up, the text becomes progressively ludicrous and intolerably boring.

Why should anyone, especially a talented, intelligent young director like Mohamed Abul Su'ood, bother to stage *Titus Andronicus* when other far superiour Shakespearean texts, like *The Tempest*, *Twelfth Night*, or *Much Ado About Nothing* still await their Egyptian premiere? His recent production at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, an adapted version of the text in nine scenes, rechristened *Rabee' El-Dam* (Spring of Blood), spelt the answer forcefully in every detail – in the set, the costumes, the props and the accompanying, haunting, soundtrack, all of which he himself designed. Seating his small audience on the spacious stage of one of the big theatres at the Bibliotheca and using it as both performance space and auditorium, he literally took them behind the scenes, casting them in the role of colluders in the action rather than witnesses or casual spectators. Apart from two sloping ramps, bordered with dead trees, which bounded the audience on either side, the basic structure of the stage itself, its bare walls, two columns at the back and metal fixtures – the service-ladders on the sides of the proscenium arch,

the catwalks and grids connecting them on top, the spotlights rails and bars, the space up in the flies and the huge sliding door which leads backstage (normally screened off and used for entrances and exits and to let in the sets) – constituted the set. This created a composite, multidimensional performance space which allowed Abul Su'ood to deploy the action around the audience and, indeed, above their heads.

At no point were you allowed to rest your gaze in one direction, but had to be looking everywhere, far and near, up and down and sideways all the time. One minute the actors would be scampering up and down a service ladder, clattering across a catwalk or hollering at you from somewhere up in the flies; another, you would find them running up and down the ramps on your side or, literally, under your feet, writhing in agony, screaming for help, or crouching to hide; and when the black, forbidding door at the back opened, you could glimpse in the distance, through the darkened hall behind it, shadowy figures materializing on the open terrace at its far end, as if out of the dark sky outside, and advancing towards you. As the sights and sound assailed you from all directions, all at once, and the short, crisp scenes cascaded, you felt besieged, engulfed in a dizzying whirlpool of blood and violence, and the mounting sense of entrapment generated a crescendo of anxiety, agitation and even terror.

Abul Su'ood's manipulation of his few, carefully chosen props (including two small wicker cages with live, cooing pigeons inside, suspended from the flies, corresponding with Lavinia imprisoned in a wheel chair and ironically contrasting with the rampant savagery underneath) was equally imaginative and versatile. Tamora's man-size wooden cage, in which she is carried in as war prisoner, another

ironical correspondence, could become a fence or a table with a stretcher serving as its top. Planted in a particular situation, a simple, familiar object could become a heightened symbol or a poignant, concrete metaphor. A stunning, unforgettable instance of this kind of transformation occurred in the scene of the rape and mutilation of Lavinia (superbly played by Nirmeen Hassan El-Bureedi) by Tamora's two sons (Ziad Yusef and Ahmad Abdallah). Exquisitely choreographed around the space, in an eerie play of light and shadow, with blood-curdling music and sound-effects rising and falling in the background, it ends with Lavinia dragged behind one of the ramps; though her body is pulled down and disappears, her hands, soon to be lopped off, remain in view, spotlit, desperately clutching at the edge and her face pops up twice, twisted in a terrible silent scream. When she emerges, in a tattered slip, handless, with "a crimson river of warm blood, / Like to a bubbling fountain", as her father would later say, gushing between "her roséd lips", one of the rapists disappears for a minute and comes back with a big metal rubbish bin on wheels, opens the lid, helps the other to stuff her twisted, broken body into it, then closes the lid and wheels her off stage, as if to a rubbish dump. Though the image of a human being in a rubbish bin was used before on stage, by Beckett, for instance, in *Endgame*, the timing of it here was so profoundly shocking that I think I shall never again look at a rubbish bin without remembering this scene.

But more than anything else, the choice of modern dress here was crucial to the kind of impact Abul Su'ood wanted his production to make. As the actors stormed in, the soldiers in modern combat uniform, the citizens in black jeans and coats, the new emperor, Saturninus, in an elegant white suit with a red bow, and the future empress, Tamora, in a

red evening dress, the setting was suddenly transposed from imperial Rome to war-ravaged Iraq, its recent military dictatorship and current foreign invasion. From that moment on, the play took on a new significance, gaining tremendous immediacy and relevance. It would be fruitless, however, to seek in this production easy equations or clear equivalencies between fictional and real places and characters. Abul Su'ood is too sophisticated an artist to allow that and Iraq is here evoked not as a specific place or situation, but as a tragic human experience that can happen anywhere. Abul Su'ood doesn't use the stage, as many have done before him and others still do, as a political forum to criticize, satirize, preach an ideology, or make an argument but, rather, to protest his anger against the world, to hold up a *mirror* to it and show it its ugly face, to create images that body forth his passionate response to its growing militarism, jingoism, injustice and gratuitous cruelty. When asked three years ago why he was doing Edward Bond's harrowing *Lear* at Al-Hanager, he answered : "With all the suffering and bloodshed in the world around us, it is the only play I feel I can do right now." Well, the world has not changed since; if anything, it has grown worse. I suppose this is why Abul Su'ood decided to create his own version of *Titus Andronicus* now just as Bond had done with Shakespeare's *King Lear* many years ago.

In Abul Su'ood's version, Titus (Mohamed Farouk) becomes a lame, bandaged, old soldier, coming back from battle more broken than victorious, leaning on a crutch and too frail to bluster the way Shakespeare's hero did. This significant toning down was essential for Abul Su'ood's apocalyptic vision and modern frame of reference and is vastly different from the handling of the character in Brook's 1950s production. In it, according to Richard David, the original temporal

setting of the play was kept and the set "richly suggested the civilized barbarity of late imperial Rome." In the hands of Olivier, David notes, Titus came across as "a Great man, cantankerous, choleric, and at the same time compelling." Farouk couldn't have matched Olivier if he tried; fortunately Abul Su'ood didn't want him to. A less muted Titus would not have fitted in with the new version of emperor Saturninus (delightfully played with comic verve by Wael El-Alian as a slightly crazed, clownish ruler, given to screaming hilarious speeches in colloquial Arabic), the new Aaron (a woman in drag suavely played by Sarah Medhat), or Silvia Jan's new Tamora who, still dangerously seductive and powerful, was too sophisticated and modern to pretend to Titus, as her original counterpart did (in Act 5, scene 2), that she was "Revenge, sent from the infernal kingdom."

*Spring of Blood* would not have seen the light without the support of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, the head of its Arts Centre, composer and maestro Sherif Moheiddin and the director of the theatre programme there, Mahmoud Abu Doma, himself a gifted director. In Egypt, it takes people of courage and special calibre to sponsor an independent artist, working outside mainstream professional theatre, and a daring, iconoclastic one at that. Most of Abul Su'ood's previous work was staged at Al-hanager – a place known for championing new talent and taking big risks. Luckily for him this time, the Bibliotheca decided to have its own resident theatre troupe and invited him to launch it, as he had successfully done with his own independent group, Shrapnel, in 1992, when he was only 21. With Mohamed Farouk, a core-member of Shrapnel, as executive director, they auditioned hopeful actors and chose twelve. After ten days of general technical training and cultural grooming they started working on the text, exploring it, relating to it,

practicing doubling and trebling in parts, writing their ideas and feelings about the play and doing endless improvisations. A lot of their work went into the production and a lot went out; but the end result was more than rewarding, and not just for them. The Bibliotheca is proud of its new troupe and we, the audience, have had a stirring and memorable theatrical experience. A female acquaintance told me as we left the theatre that they should have tested the blood pressure of people before letting them in and that she felt as if she had been to Iraq and back. Can you beat that for a compliment ?

**Ahmad El-Attar's**

***The Temple***

(est. 1993)

## A Note on *Oedipus The Leader**

Another Cultural Development Fund production, to take part in this year's CIFET is by Al-Ma'bad [The Temple] theatre company. Though titled *Oedipus, The Leader*, it is based on three texts, all dealing with the story of Oedipus : Jean Cocteau's *La Machine Infernale*, Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* and Ali Salem's *You Killed the Beast*. Other material is also interwoven, such as excerpts from Jean Cocteau's memoirs in Egypt, speeches from Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* and choruses from various other Greek plays. Apart from the innovative text, the show, entitled *Oedipus the Leader*, promises a very exciting scenography, with video projections of old films and specially filmed footage of the actors, including a scene where Oedipus machine-guns Laius down after a dispute as to whose Mercedes has the right of way. In addition, there is a specially constructed catwalk that divides the AUC Wallace Theatre lengthwise and a crucified Prometheus suffering patiently in the balcony. Ahmed El-Attar's actors are exceptionally sensitive and well-trained; the majority of them were trained in theatre either at the AUC or abroad. This made it possible for El-Attar, the director, to present the show in three different languages : Arabic, French and English. When I watched a rehearsal of *Oedipus the Leader*, I thought it stood a very good chance of making an impression on the international jury if chosen to represent Egypt at the contest. Unfortunately, however, the troupe applied for funding rather late with the result that the show will not be ready before the committee's

* 29 August 1996.

deadline. Still, audiences can get the chance to see the show at the Wallace from 1-7 September; the theatre was provided free in a generous gesture from the AUC to its students and alumni who are members of Al-Ma'bad.

# Little Brother is Watching You*

I had always thought we only had one official public censor and that s/he alone was vested with the power and authority (if not the right) ro bully writers, harass directors, and ban performances. True, Al-Azhar interfered once, in the sixties, to stop a play — Abdel-Rahman El-Sharqawi's *Al-Hussayn : Rebel and Martyr* — about the life of the Prophet's grandson, but it was an isolated incident; as far as I know, the country's supreme religious authority has since steered clear of theatre, if not of other things (or perhaps it is the artists themselves who have wisely steered clear of religious themes and characters). I had also believed that censorship did not extend to what is regarded as "foreign soil," i.e. foreign cultural centres. What a fool I was ! Both illusions were shattered last week when I heard what had befallen The Temple's *Al-Lajnah* (The Committee, or, more precisely, The Interviewing Committee) on 24 June at the French Cultural Centre.

I was not there that day but had learnt from the Centre's monthly bulletin that it would run for three days and had planned to go the following evening. I had already seen two of The Temple's three productions : Tawfiq El-Hakim's *He Knew How to Die*, at The Wallace in 1994, and *Oedipus* — a theatrical montage of excerpts from seven literary texts, in Arabic, French and English, including Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, Jean Cocteau's *The Infernal Machine*, and Ali Salem's comic version of the Oedipus myth, *You Killed The Beast* at the same venue in 1996. The third, *The Bus*, which the company played on the fringe of The Cairo International Festival for

* 16 July 1998.

Experimental Theatre at the Saqqara Sports Club in 1995, I had sadly missed. Fortunately, however, British critic Alexis Sierz who had seen it during the festival and written about it in the *New Theatre Quarterly* sent the *Weekly* a copy of his review. "The best thing in the whole festival," was his verdict. The Temple (*Al-Ma'bad*) founded in 1993 as an independent theatre company by director Ahmed El-Attar, actress Maya El-Qalyubi, and executive producer and actor Ali Belail, seemed to have come a long way. From its humble beginnings on the roof of the house of a sympathetic friend, it spread its wings and took flight. I was naturally curious to find out where their flight had taken them and looked forward to *Al-Lajnah*.

Of the three scheduled performances, however, only one materialised; the other two were inexplicably cancelled. It was not until I met a young director and founder of another independent group two weeks later that the mystery was unravelled. According to him, the play, written and directed by El-Attar, had gone down very well with the audience. One person, however, sat fuming throughout the show and, at the end, stalked out of the auditorium in high dudgeon. Foaming at the mouth, he loudly threatened to send an official complaint to the French ambassador and create a diplomatic crisis. Who was he? And what was he making such a fuss about ? people wondered. They were not kept in suspense for long. Soon enough, he pompously declared, in the course of venting his ire on the poor director, that he was the "censor" appointed by the Ministry of Higher Education to vet the activities of foreign cultural centres and make sure that no one tarnished the image of Egypt or soiled her reputation. Had *Al-Lajnah* done anything of the sort ? "Yes, it mocked the millitary," he said, "put the 1973 war on a par with the '48, '56, and '67 wars, and criticised

(unfairly in his opinion) the Egyptian army's treatment of its conscripts."

One line in the dialogue he found particularly offensive : when one of the interviewers asks the young applicant what he would do it he saw his former commanding officer while driving down the street, he promptly retorts : "Run him down of course." One has to be thoroughly stuffy and humorless to label this retort "unpatriotic." I wonder none of our successive censors, from the sixties onwards, including the women, has ever objected to the frequent, symbolic representation of Egypt on stage as an "honest whore" ? Isn't this a worse smear on the so-called "image of Egypt" than drawing attention to the faults and short-comings of the military ? Ironically, the only satirical assault upon this image was made in the sixties by Saadeddin Wahba who had earlier popularised it in a number of plays. In his *Nightmares Backstage*, he savagely satirised not only the critics, the audiences and the theatrical conventions of the day, but also his own plays and the image of Egypt he had established as a convention. But old habits die hard and the image still persists — as a recent version of Shawqi Abdel-Hakim's *Shafiqa and Metwally* amply testifies.

As my young narrator went on, he described how the French Centre had finally cowered before the threats of the irate "censor" and agreed to oust *Al-Lajnah* and the trouble El-Attar had finding another space until ProHelvetia came to the rescue and offered to host two performances at the Swiss Club in Imbaba. I had missed those as well. "Never mind," he cheerfully said, "you can still catch it. The AUC is hosting three further performances at the Howard starting Thursday." I was pleased but felt deeply bitter about what The Temple and similar

independent theatre groups had to put up with to put on a show. Over the years they have learnt to cope with the scarcity of funds, publicity and performance spaces. But the last thing they need is a secret army of little censors who can infiltrate any place and spring upon you any moment. They could manage one censor, especially when he is as liberal and enlightened as the current one, Ali Abu Shadi, but not an army, or even a small battalion. (I wonder how many there really are ?) If theatre must be censored at all, it should be done by people who understand theatre and not some bureaucrat, however proficient in his or her field. And since it is ridiculous to assume that theatre switches identities once it steps inside a foreign cultural centre, this rule should apply to the productions hosted there.

On Friday, I attended *Al-Lajnah*; and though I had been told earlier the offending bits I spent the whole 45 minutes trying to puzzle out why anyone should find this pungent black comedy offensive — unless, of course, it was the truth. Some people, as Eliot wisely said, "cannot bear too much reality." Even real-life terminology, it seems, is offensive to some : an actual military term, "mule company," was taken by our little censor as an insult — a clear case of if the shoe fits, wear it.

The reality portrayed in *Al-Lajnah* is an unsettling combination of the familiar, the sinister, the tragic and the absurd. What starts out as a seemingly ordinary interview, despite the strong dose of caricature, soon develops into a grotesque and nightmarish interrogation session where the hapless applicant is bullied, terrorised, mentally harassed and physically abused. No wonder he begins to stutter, grows progressively more frenzied and incoherent, and finally collapses. The distortion of the ordinary begins in the very first scene where an office

boy, dressed as a waiter, walks in ceremoniously, leading a black dog, which he chains to one side of the hall, then proceeds to dust the table and chairs in the manner of a priest performing a religious ritual. As soon as the foppish, puffed-up boss prances in, leading two female assistants, a slinky redhead and a glowering brunette, the menial undergoes a transformation : he turns into a dog, panting, begging and fawning on the boss who affectionately pats his head. The contrast between this travesty and the real dog, lying happily on the floor, set up a metaphorical web of correspondences. The phrase "the underdog" became a concrete image, and so did King Lear's "a dog is obeyed in office".

The dramatic formula of the ordinary situation which gradually takes on sinister overtones is not new of course. What sets this play apart from the rest, however, and gives it its distinct flavour, is not only its bleak revelation of the many frustrations that beset the majority of Egyptian young people today and their pervasive sense of helplessness and hopelessness, but also the rhythm and structure of the dialogue. Moments of deceptive calm, forced geniality, and artificial bonhomie alternated with rapid-fire barrages of questions meant to intimidate rather than elicit information or draw out the applicant. A lot of the comedy stemmed from the rapidity of the questions which left him no time to think about his answers ("Are you a Muslim ? / Yes. / Is your wife veiled ? / Yes. / Are you married ? / No.") It also came from his excessive eagerness to please, which led him regularly to parrot the boss's pretentious views and even his reminiscences, down to his inflection and tone of voice ("When I was in America, I watched a lot of television. / Have you ever been to America ? / No.") A further source

of hilarity was his unconfessed ignorance of foreign languages, while the questions were thrown at him in Arabic, English and French.

Trilingualism, in varying degrees, is a feature of The Temple's productions. Intertextuality in another. Here, verses from the Qur'an, Christ's "Do not think I have come to bring peace to the world" (Matthew 10:34), press cuttings, a sentence from André Breton's *L'Amour Fou*, pop songs and nursery rhymes were woven into the text, especially when the applicant had withdrawn into his own private world of fragmented memories, broken images and insane hallucinations. The intricate rhythm of the dialogue, the intimate space at the Howard, and the interaction with the audience built into the text put a tremendous burden on all five performers and they did a fine job. Though most of the parts were stock types, drawn with broad stokes, except perhaps for the applicant, the actors — Mahmoud Nofal as the office boy, Salah Fahmi as the boss, Nadine Khan and Noha Farouk as his assistants, and Mustafa Hashish as the applicant — managed to infuse them with a kind of sinister depth and a hint of surreal horror. A pity that such a clean, well-written, finely acted and exciting new production should have left the little censor so completely out of his depth that the only thing he felt he could do was try to quarantine it immediately. Perhaps he was worried that an epidemic of good theatre might spread.

## Home, Sweet Home*

After his writing debut, *Oedipus, The Leader*, an intricate, polyphonic collage of a number of varied texts (including plays, poems, letters, memoirs, and documentary films in Arabic, English and French) which he directed and presented at the Wallace theatre in 1995 during the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre, director Ahmad El-Attar (a graduate of the Department of Performing Arts at the American University in Cairo, 1992), went on to produce his first original, full-fledged play. *Al-Lajnah*, performed in 1998 at The French Cultural Centre, the Swiss Club, and Howard theatre successively to packed audiences, seemed startingly different, in both conception and technique, from the earlier *Oedipus*. Gone were the mythological dimensions, the free overlapping and merging of past and present, myth and history, the grand, panoramic spatio-temporal sweep, and the studied use of montage to create multiple stages and perspectives. *Oedipus* was a fascinating experiment, if somewhat rambling, self-indulgent and over- embroidered.

By comparison, *Al-Lajnah* (*The Committee*) seemed technically tame, less exuberant, almost a throwback to the classical Aristotelian model, three unities and all. The time of the dramatic action (the interviweing of a young man for a government job by a bureaucratic committee of three) is exactly the same as that of the performance – a quality much praised by Aristotle. There are no scene-changes, no intrusion or side-tracking. El-Attar's austere manipulation of the classical dramatic model, in its most rigid of forms (seldom found even

* 3 August 2000.

in Greek drama), was a masterly feat and endowed the play with a remarkable degree of tautness and cohesion. The play was simply the interview which provided everything – the action, the dramatic development, the climax, the revelation and the tragic end. Decked out to look initially like a realistic drama (in terms of set, costume, characters and props), the play proceeds to gradually shatter the thin crust of ordinariness, the illusion of a sane, logical, familiar, comprehensible and well-ordered world and to transform itself, through bizarre wit, grim humour, the surrealistic management of the dialogue with its many verbal absurdities, into a kind of nightmarish, Kafkaesque trial. Neither the audience (who are for the best part of the performance falling off their chairs with laughter), nor the timid, fawning young man, who is willing to say anything and contradict himself constantly in order to gain favour with his interviewers, understand the reason for the growing hostility and mounting agression of the committee.

As the verbal assaults develop into physical violence, and the now panic-stricken young man begins to break down under the combined pressure of terror and mental confusion, the vacuum of incomprehension, created by the sinister and frustrating absence of motives, widens and grows more menacing, threatening to swallow us too. What the play finally and ultimately communicates to us, amid the crazed, frenzied ravings of the young man, is the senseless, wanton brutality and ruthless oppression of the inherited patriarchal power structures (military, political, bureaucratic, cultural or ideological) which dominate, terrorize and corrupt the individual, particularly the weak and young. No wonder the play stirred up a hornet's nest when it

was first performed, enranging one censor who bullied the French Cultural Centre into cancelling two scheduled performances.

El-Attar, however, is not easily intimidated and guards his artistic freedom and integrity with great ferocity and grim determination. For six years the independent theatre group he founded in 1993 worked without financial help from any quarter, funding productions out of their own pockets. It was only last year that they started accepting small grants from some foreign cultural agencies. Nevertheless, El-Attar and his comrades are as audacious and brave as ever, as their latest production, *Life is Beautiful*, or *Waiting for My Uncle in America*, tetifies.

In both *Oedipus* and *The Committee,* the lust for power and its effect on the individual and human relationships was a major preoccupation – a central theme that linked the two scripts despite their formal and technical differences. It also informs *Life is Beautiful* — a horrendously, bitterly ironical title; but this time it is worked out dramatically in the context of family life and relationships, in the private, intimate space of the home. Predictably, the choice of "home" (an emotionally loaded word, traditionally connoting shelter, security, warmth, and mental and physical nourishment) gives the theme a personal edge and renders it more poignant and deeply disturbing. The family home which confronts us in this production, however, is a cruel, cynical travesty – a cage-like frame of metal poles and wire fences which embraces both the stage and auditorium and divides them into smaller cages. On the fence, which extended from the stage along the left side of the auditorium, hung a shuttered window, a clock, and a row of books. The effect was surrealistic and quite unsettling. The three

cage- like rooms on stage, however, were naturalistically furnished, down to the smallest detail. The first (the younger son's) sported a bed, a wall-cupboard, a television with a lighted blank screen, magazine pictures of pop stars on the wall and a high mound of rubbish made up of soft drinks cans, magazines and fast food plastic containers. The second was hung around with used blood bags, with their attached tubes dangling to the floor; in the middle was a typical hospital bed on which lay the shrivelled mother, pale as a corpse, painfully coughing and wheezing. The third, the elder son's, was simply a toilet with piles of newspapers everywhere.

The scene, with its dull, muted colours, cold-white or ghostly yellow lighting, was earily chilling, suggesting some godforsaken underground cell or dungeon reeking of sickness, death, excrement and human waste. The impression is deepened by the inhabitants' repetitive movements, the alternately mechanical and deranged manner in which they scream or mumble their words and keep repeating them, and their desperate reaching up at intervals (marked by ethereal music and special lighting) as if to clutch at an elusive promise of fulfilment or liberation. Ironically, this recurrent collective dream of salvation is rudely interrupted and dissipated every time by a call from the rich uncle in America who dangles a different promise : wealth and the power that comes with it, but on one condition, that all submit to the authority of the father and obey him blindly.

The father who sits on a chair in front of the cells, like a jailor, waiting for his brother who, like Beckett's Godot, never comes, and alternately curses the maid, scolds his wife and sons, pompously displays his superior knowledge and wisdom in deliciously absurd

monologues or spins out fantastic visions of future wealth and luxury — a priceless, hilarious caricature of the dry, tyrannical, vainglorious, power-hungry and sterile patriarch.

To this grotesque, macabre family portrait (in the present), El-Attar juxtaposes images from their early life, when they were young, warm and loving, with an enormous zest for life and a capacity for kindness and generous compassion. Ironically, it is the maid who is frequently scolded and cursed by them, and who has slaved for them for nearly twenty years, acting as a life-support system, who fondly recalls those images in tender, vivid and moving monologues. The juxtaposition of past and present inevitably poses the question : What went wrong ?

In the final scene, after the only blackout which marks the death of the mother, the father and his sons indulge in soul-searching monologues, voiced simultaneously, suggesting several answers in a deafening cacophonous din. The answers have one thing in common, though expressed differently : a warning against the debilitating, soul-crushing, deadening effect of fear — fear of breaking the rules, disobeying the authorities, being different, being oneself, being with the other. The play ends with a loud, passionate, rebellious choral call for freedom, and the effect is liberating and exhilarating.

*Life is Beautiful* has restored my faith in the artistic vigour and intellectual vitality of the Free Theatre Movement with it independent groups. It is at once serious and hilarious, urgently relevant and accessible and artistically subtle and sophisticated. It is finely conceived, designed and staged, and boasts a superb cast who gave stunning performances : Salwa Mohamed Ali as the maid; Ahmad Kamal as the father; Hassan El-Kredly as the younger son; Walid

Marzouk as the elder son and Magda Abdu as the mother. Equally inspired were the contributions of stage-designer Hussein Baydoun, sound-designer and composer Hassan Khan, lighting- designer Christoph Gilarmet, and costume-designer and make-up artist Rania Sirag. If *Life is Beautiful* plays at the coming CIFET in September, as I expect it will, give yourself a treat and see it. It may make life seem beautiful to you as it has done for me.

## Destination Unknown*

Ahmad El-Attar's *A Trip to Nowhere : A Cairene Tour for Tourists and Lovers* promises you not only theatrical excitement, but an actual tour of Zamalek on a real bus as well. This is not the first time El-Attar and his Temple independent theatre troupe set a play in a bus, using it as both performance space and auditorium. They did it a few years ago during one CIFET and got a rave review from a British critic who declared their show, which played on the fringe and was not even listed in its schedule or catalogue, the best in the whole festival. The first time, however, the bus remained stationary. The decision to get it moving this time was neither a gimmick nor a sensational stunt, but a dramatic necessity and an essential part of the story.

The play is about time and change in contemporary Egypt and how they affect places and human relationships. As the bus moves round Zamalek, the female guide will point out to her passenger-audience some places and buildings, talk about their history, revealing the changes that have come over this part of Cairo in recent history and its social connotations. But together with the history of Zamalek, the audience will gradually discover the personal history of the guide and the male driver who were once in love but were unable to cope with the difficulties and complications which beset the majority of young Egyptian couples when they decide to get married. The two histories, the local and personal, will intertwine and offset each other with the aid of video projections on two television sets on the bus, flashing images of the same people and places in the past.

* 30 August 2001.

It is a brilliant conception in which the physical movement of the bus effects the transformation of the real into the theatrical by making the streets part of the dramatic world, the virtual reality of the play and its setting, and makes the audience at once real passengers on a guided tour, and festival-goers, playing at being passengers, and driven around and guided by two people who share the same dual real / imaginary status. You cannot get closer to blurring the barriers between fact and fiction, reality and theatrical fabrication than that. A few years ago, a 10-minute play, taking place in a car, with two actors in the front seats and three spectators squashed in the back, looking on over their shoulders and literally breathing down their necks, caused a sensation at the Louisville theatre festival held annually by Jon Jory's Actor's Theatre. Could that be the next step for El-Attar and his Temple troupe ?

**Effat Yehya's**

***The Caravan***

(est. 1993)

## Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf ?*

When ten years ago, my sister Sanaa, then in her early twenties, announced to me that she was translating Edna O'Brien's recently published *Virginia* into Arabic, I thought she was joking. Not only is the text devilishly difficult to translate, with its stream-of-consciousness vague modalities, fluid syntax, subtle shifts and intricate, variegated rhythms and tonalities, but its subject matter too is extremely sensitive and thorny. It belongs to an area of human feeling and experience which people, in our part of the world, prefer to ignore and leave untouched : namely lesbianism and the androgynous potential of female identity.

She would sweat over the play, I told her, and expend a lot of creative energy, only to be rewarded with silent disapproval, at best, or loud, censorious castigation. Besides, I added, no one would ever dare put it on the stage.

Time was to prove me wrong. Last week a young woman by the name of Effat Yehya rang me up to invite me to a production at the National Theatre of that same translation which Sanaa dauntlessly undertook and published in the *Theatre Magazine* in August 1982. I was thrilled. Here was another young female director, with her own self-funding troupe, the Friends of the National Theatre (later The Caravan), a new and valuable addition to the Free Theatre Movement; and, what is more, like Sanaa, she was not afraid of Virginia Woolf.

* 30 April 1992.

Yehya studied theatre and psychology at the American University in Cairo (AUC), which explains, perhaps, her attraction to O'Brien's difficult psychological text. For a period, too, she worked closely with the Scottish director Ross Illions at the AUC, assisting at such productions as *Summer and Smoke* (another daring psychological play), *Thank You Dr Sterling* and *Born Yesterday*, among others. In recognition of her talent and as a gesture of appreciation for the work she has done, Mr Illions has contributed substantially to the funding of her present production which she, on her part, has dedicated to him.

Of her talent and technical expertise, there was plenty of evidence here. The simple abstract set (with a black gauze partition at the back, framing a small white screen on which various shots of Bloomsbury, London and the country were projected) was fittingly sombre and subdued without being oppressive. Here, Yehya was well-advised in letting herself be guided by O'Brien's stage directions. The uniformly white lighting, too, was austere and deeply evocative. It established a sensitive interplay of light and shadow, tenderness and boldness, softness and garishness, which corresponded deftly and unobstrusively with the subtle transitions of tone and mood and helped to underline the intensity and emotional volatility of the central character.

Some cuts in the original text, however, were inevitable and they weakened its general impact and reduced our sense of the complexity of Mrs Woolf's relationship with her husband Leonard and her friend, Vita Sackville-West. The play too, unlike the published translation, was given in colloquial Arabic, rather unwisely, in my view. It brought it uncomfortably close to Egyptian daily life with its deeply entrenched prejudices and taboos. Some members of the audience looked embarrassed, whilst others could not suppress their giggles.

The major weakness of the production, however, and its most damaging aspect was the acting. One can understand and sympathise with Yehya's dilemma. Good actors, right now, are in very short supply even in the professional theatre and the play she chose requires actors of exceptional talent and virtuosity. One must remember that in the play's première at the Stratford Festival, Ontario, in June 1980, it was the magnificent Maggie Smith who undertook the title role.

After casting about for a suitable actress, without success, Yehya found herself in the unfortunate position of having to play Virginia herself. Physically, she is unsuited to the part — too soft and fluffy — and her voice and performance failed to compensate. She brought out the character's vulnerability, helpless bewilderment and genuine warmth; but there was nothing of Virginia's catty side, her acrid humour, toughness of mind and rugged emotions.

Heidi Abdel-Ghani, an attractive art student in her acting debut, played Vita. She looked suitably aggressively sexy and flamboyant and her sensuality contrasted well with Virginia's etherealness. She was too young and inexperienced, however, to understand fully the character she was grappling with. As for Tariq Sa'id (a talented director in his own right) who doubled as father and husband, he skated blithely through both parts without seeming to understand or care for either.

With a better cast, or if more work is done with the present one, the production could be salvaged, as I hope it will when it is given a second run at the Avant-garde theatre.

## A Note on *Life Sketches**

Effat Yehya's *Life Sketches*, produced at Al-Hanager Centre, was viewed by the CIFET selection committee in 1993. This is what I wrote at the time. :

Effat Yehya's *Life Sketches* which focuses on the coercion of women in oriental societies was bound to generate a lote of male antagonism when viewed by the CIFET selection committee. With Nora Amin tied up in ropes and dumped on a table in the background, and a male torturer who keeps urging her to declare that she is happy, despite the fact that she is gagged, the play had no hope with the committee. Feminism on the stage, like male and female sexuality, is still very much frowned on and regarded as subversive. Yehya's expressionistic style and her palpable agit-prop attitude did not further her chances.

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* 2 September 1993.

## Song of the Desert*

Women directors are a rare breed in Egypt, in cinema or the theatre. In the latter field, they number only four – all of them young women in their twenties. In the case of Caroline Khalil and Rasha El-Gammal (both AUC graduates), despite a highly promising first *oeuvre* on either side, it is still early days to judge whether they will continue and in what direction. Compared to them, Abeer Ali and Effat Yehya (the latter also AUC trained) – though they burst on the theatrical scene only three years ago – may be regarded as old hands at the game. Each has formed her own troupe and developed a distinctive style of production – folkloric and ritualistic in the case of Ali, expressionistic and transcultural in the case of Yehya. In both cases, however, Ali's El-Misaharati and Yehya's El-Qafilah (The Caravan), the troupe operates on egalitarian lines, in the non-hierarchical way typical of amateur theatre. And, indeed, the status of both troupes is irkingly dubious – solely definable in terms of that no-man's-land between professional and amateur theatre.

Like El-Gretly's Al-Warsha, they are self-funding, non-profit-making, and without a permanent home. Denied regular funds, long runs, the right to open a box office at their temporary venues, their contact with the public has been so far fitful and erratic. And yet, with the help of some foreign cultural agencies, some local contributions and whatever assistance they can wheedle out of the government, financial

* 27 October 1994.

or otherwise, these semi-professional, semi-amateur troupes continue to produce the best theatre available in Cairo nowadays. Indeed when I was asked recently to nominate the best show of the year, I said, without a moment's hesitation, Al-Warsha's *Tides of Night*.

Effat Yehya's recent *Sahrawiya* (English title *Desertscape I*) seen at Al-Hanager Centre last week and scheduled for another brief run in November, may not artistically measure up to *Tides of Night*, but it certainly rates higher in terms of technique, authenticity and audacity than any other production this year, with nothing matching it except, perhaps, El-Tali'a's *Child of Sand*. Using the first act of Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* as a launching pad, Yehya proceeded to produce a sofisticated satire on the position of women in Egypt and, by implication, all over the world. The same method (successfully attested in former productions) of group work, collective research and writing, was adopted here. But before each actress wrote her role, some initial, necessary groundwork was done first by Yehya and the permenant artistic core of El-Qafilah troupe to pave the way and define the direction and perspective.

Egyptian equivalents for Churchill's Isabella Bird (the 19th century Scottish traveller), Lady Nijo (the 13th century Japanese Courtesan), Dull Gret (of the famous Brueghel painting *Dulle Griet*), and Patient Griselda (of Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale* in *The Canterbury Tales*) had to be found. These became respectively an upper-class woman of the Egyptian twenties who, coerced by the veil and its ramifications, took refuge in travelling abroad (a character who has a basis in reality); an itinerant fair-ground dancer (Ghaziyyah) of roughtly the same period;

an ancient Egyptian young woman sacrificed to the Nile in the well-known Pharonic annual ritual; and Anees El-Galees from the *Arabian Nights*. Churchill's Marlene, as the Egyptian Nayra, kept her contemporary status as a woman of the nineties, and her Pope Joan kept her medieval one though speaking in colloquial Arabic.

Churchill's setting was also completely changed : a desert scene with heaps of sand and rocky hills at the back replaced the posh restaurant in the original text. The moods of the characters too, and their relationships underwent a sizeable change. Here, the relaxed atmosphere of a jovial dinner party, with women drinking and nattering, gave way to an atmosphere of loneliness, reminiscent at once of Beckett's desolate landscapes and Sartre's *Huis Clos*.

Indeed, the ghost of Beckett is conjured up even before the show begins : as the audience walk in, they can clearly see Nayra (the contemporary business woman), despite the dimmed stage, buried up to her neck in sand like Winnie in *Happy Days* – a position which she keeps until half way through the play. What is more, Nayra's first words which open the play have a distinct Beckettian ring and the same cryptic quality typical of his dialogue. Immediately after, the traveller (Awatif), played by Maysa Zaki, bursts but of a coffin-like box at the back to frenziedly ask, echoing Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon, when they can move.

Meanwhile, the Pharaonic bride of the Nile conducts her water rituals, climbing a pyramid-like structure carrying a jug, then pouring water from the top into a huge urn at the foot of the stage. This ritual is performed intermittently throughout the show and at one point she

accompanies it with lighting a small fire. Water and fire are of course loaded symbols, and here they confer on the graceful Areeg Ibrahim, in her beautifully designed Pharaonic costume, an aura of magic, at once highly evocative and tantalizingly vague. As the dancer, Aisha (delightfully played by Salwa Mohamed Ali), walks in, there is a distinct shift in mood. Sombreness gives way to vivacity and lyricism to drama. The stage suddenly lights up and becomes vividly alive. Earthy, honest, gregarious and shockingly plain-spoken, Aisha draws a truthful and convincing image of a woman's life at the lower depths – an image which posesses a rare kind of touching dignity, despite all the crude vulgarity.

Rather than alienate the three refined and educated women on stage, Aisha brings them slowly together. The communal spirit created by her is enforced by the group's response to the story of Pope Joan – the medieval woman in drag who was appointed Pope for her theological brilliance then stoned to death when she became pregnant. Tragic as the story may be, in the play Nora Amin brings out its full potential as a hilarious joke, with a lot of the humour levelled at the bishops and the cardinals.

Gradually, the interaction of the various characters works to establish their various degrees of consciousness and to enhance their awareness of their tragic existences. When the mythical ideal woman (by male standards, of course), Anees El-Galees, played by Heidi Abdel-Ghani, walks in, suitably dressed as an oriental fairy-tale princess, she acts as a revealing mirror in which each character recognises the truth about herself through similarity or contrast. After

that, Effat Yehya seemed to have found herself in the unenviable position of not knowing how to end the play. In a disappointing final sequence, which invoked once more Sartre's definition of hell (as the eternal reliving of the past), she had her characters go round in aimless circles, miming earlier recollections and harrowing memories, then drop down – not dead, naturally, since they are already dead and buried.

Nevertheless, Yehya's *Sahrawiya* (literally, "of the desert") represents a valuable addition to her troupe's repertoire and a dramatically valid and forceful argument for women's liberation. It is a production by and for women, and for all theatre-lovers.

# Desertscape II*

Al-Hanager's contribution to the CIFET this year is, as usual, young and exuberant. Three productions have already been seen by the public (*Mannequin*, *Desertscape II*, and *Joseph the Tiger*) of which *Manneqin* was nominated for viewing by the selection committee.

Al-Hanager would have done much better to choose Effat Yehya's flamboyant and frothy satire on life in Egypt today. *Desertscape II* is based on Alastair Cording's play *Lanark*, translated and adapted by Ahmed Ismail with the director. The original was severely cut down, modified and Egyptianised, and infused with poems by Salah Jahine and Eliah Abu Mady, excerpts from Edna O'Brien's *Virginia*, Botto Strausse's *The Time and the Room*, old Egyptian songs and many barbed satirical parodies of politicians, preachers and popular entertainers.

Structurally, it resembles boxes within boxes, with each story generating a new one. It begins with the creation of the world, where two spirits representing art and music (one spirit wears a hat with the handle of a lute sticking out from it, the other a headgear topped with a palette) introduce light and sound into the world at the instructions of a mysterious 'creator'. It proceeds to present an image of a doomed society of political charlatans, frustrated lovers, oppressed artists, drug addicts and lost souls — all riddled with skin cancer to boot — and ends with the appearance of the mysterious creator / author, a là Pirandello in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, who goes on to write the disastrous final scene.

* 29 August 1996.

All are doomed to die because they are failures, and he prophesies an earthquake that will wipe the country off the map amid the hysterical shrieking and wailling of some characters and the ludicrous pontifications and deluded ramblings of others. It was a forceful, impressive scene and was followed by the author calling for a blackout. The lights come up on the cast standing in line to take their bows, and suddenly they all jump into a gaping hole in the stage, created specially by the director, and used throughout the play for some of its most exciting and original effects. Only the author remains on stage, with the political charlatan, the eternal winner, whereupon they walk off arm-in-arm.

Effat Yehya has a flair for visual effects, achieved with the simplest possible means. As in her previous *Desertscape I* (based on Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*), the set consists simply of lengths of material hung and shaped to represent sand dunes, and two traditional Egyptian handcarts. She depended on her cast, costumes, lighting, masks and human-size puppets to inject colour and variety into her scenes. Her cast was more than competent; their enthusiasm and solid acting technique were largely responsible for the artistic energy, biting relevance, and sense of urgency that run through *Desertscape II*. The malaise which infected the lives of the five women representing the history of female oppression in *Desertscape I* has here spread to the whole society, achieving the proportions of an existential plague.

## Cofessions and Confrontations*

It is always a mistake to arrive late at a show, however, slightly, or leave before the final curtain, or the now more fashionable final black out. But if you do, you would be well advised, especially if you happen to be a critic, to keep your trap firmly shut and resist any temptation to air your views on what you have seen however much you are provoked to the contrary. I pride myself on being always on time and on having managed over the years to build up the necessary stamina for tolerating the intolerable and stoically sitting through the endless, incredibly insipid ramblings of the deadliest of deadly boring shows. My friends detect a hidden masochistic streak in this, but I call it professionalism. Another reason is that on the rare occasions when I arrived late or when my power of endurance let me down and gave way somewhere before the official end, when it seemed to me that the show had already fizzled out halfway through and I smeaked out, I always ended up feeling guilty. You think no one will notice, but they do; and if you meet a member of the cast or crew afterwards, as is bound to happen, you will invariably be told : "Pity you came late", or "left before the end. You missed the crucial scene which makes sense of everything." It makes you feel sheepish as if you are caught playing truant.

The first time this happened, I was fool enough to believe it and rushed back to gaze on the loathsome piece once more, hoping to experience that magical glow of enlightenment which the last bit would, reportedly, shed and miraculously transform the whole. Needless to

* 26 October 2000.

say, I went away feeling I had sprouted two long ears and a tail. Ever since I make a point of arriving early, even though Egyptian shows never start on time, and leaving last. More often than not, this entails a minimum of half an hour's wait and many cups of perfectly nauseating turbid liquid masquarading as turkish coffee and bought at highly exaggerrated prices; but anything is better than being taunted with having missed the magical key to the whole thing or, worse still, having to undergo the torture of watching the thing again if it turns out to be lousy.

Last week, for the first time in years, I was late for a show. I set out in good time, but when I finally arrived at the French Cultural Centre in Munira, after a particularly nasty battle with the raucous Cairo traffic, the first part of Effat Yehya's double bill, *Les Rythmes de la Memoire* and *Le Tobogan*, had started. I was deeply vexed; not because, as in some other cases, I would have to come again (I always do that anyway in the case of Yehya's work and see her productions more than once for the sheer pleasure of the experience), but like someone who had been looking forward to a special meal and starved herself in anticipation, then arrived late for the first course.

I tiptoed into the darkened theatre and was invisibly guided to a seat facing a shiny white catwalk which stretched from the stage to the middle of the auditorium. I made out a shadowy female figure, wrapped in trailing gauze, rolling and writhing on it to the tunes of a live band ensconsed below the stage on one side and hardly visible except for the singer, Sayed Shafik, who was placed above them on the stage and spotlighted. Strumming his lute, he sang Nida' Abu Murad's famous song, *Al-Atmatu Hawli Tashtadu* (The Darkness is Deepening Around

Me). The stage itself, suffused in ethereal violet light, presented a curious and intriguing sight. Against a bare stone wall (the stone effect was created by the lighting on white drapes), a man, his face painted white, and dressed in a tent-like white gown the edges of which were fastened to the floor in a circle, his right hand attached to a mysterious black rope stretching down from the flies, sat on the floor facing a woman dressed in a primitive wrap-over gown, her face similarly painted white and her hair tied to a number of similar ropes. Between them, at the back, was a lamp in the shape of a globe, a few low steps and a few candles, and in front was a big gift-box tied with ribbons.

The set, the white-paint masks, the costumes, the minimalist movement, the sitting position the two characters maintained for the most part, the orange, pink, blue and violet lighting-plan vaguely smacked of traditional Japanese theatre. The dialogue, however, seemed quite out of place in this visual context and, indeed, at odds with it. The man and woman talked of desire, sexual attraction, prostitution, pimps, seduction, rotten memories, what is legitimate and what is not, arrogance and humility, affection and violence as well as of sunrise and sunset, dawn and darkness. But whatever the subject, the general mode of the verbal exchange, though disconnected and irritatingly inconsequential, was one of a business transaction between a dealer and a client. I dimly guessed the situation : an inverted version of the one Sinatra immortalized in *Strangers in the Night* — only, these strangers were a bit odd; quite loquacious and thoroughly abstruse. I could hear and understand every word, but could not make sense of the drift of the ongoing argument or guess where it was leading. I kept feeling there was something wrong, or something missing; and when at the end the woman stood up, ripped off her skirt and threw it down

(telling the man that rather than pick up his jacket which she had thrown in the dust when he offered it to her, to mollify him, she would assign her skirt to the same fate), then walked off proudly into the auditorium in her knickers, I gaped in utter bafflement, feeling a complete dunce.

I met Effat outside the door and asked her the name of the play I had just seen and she said it was B.M. Koltes's *La Solitude dans les Champs de Coton* which she had translated into Arabic from an English translation, had her translation revised against the French original by Yves Glass, then adapted it and rechristened her version *'Iqa'at min al-Zakirah* (Memory of Rythms). I had feared she would ask me what I thought, and she did. Crushed and mortified by my obtuseness, I stammered vaguely that I thought it was "interesting" but would have to see it again before I could say since I had arrived late. "Of course," she said : "that business with the jacket at the beginning is very important. It explains a lot of things." Ah ! So that was it; there was a missing link after all and I had missed it because of the stupid traffic.

The next day I was there half an hour before *'Iqa'at* was due to start and was the first into the auditorium, looking forward to that business with the jacket which would clarify everything. I soon discovered I had already seen it the previous day. I had only missed the sight of Mirette Michel slithering down a row of seats from the back of the auditorium to the edge of the catwalk before she topped it and that took no more than three minutes. Watching the business with the jacket and the whole play a second time did not improve matters and I walked out at the end as baffled as ever. If I did not know Effat and respect her work I would have dismissed the whole thing as an elaborate, puerile

prank, or a pretentious, titillating stunt. But knowing her, I felt there was a mystery somewhere and decided to pursue it.

I asked her for the text; she only had it in Christopher Rathbone's English translation which was issued free to audience members when the play was performed at the Edinburgh Festival a few years ago. The copy she gave me was a shoddy, mangled typescript, quite illegible in parts and with the first few pages and many words and whole sentences missing. Nevertheless, it did the trick and dispelled the mystery. It was clear at once where Effat had gone wrong and why her version seemed so strained, artificial, opaque and muddled. Koltes's play is not about a man and a woman or the intricate mechanisms of desire, attraction, rejection and repulsion in the context of heterosexual relationships. It features two men, both homosexuals, but sharply differentiated as opposites in terms of race, colour, education, wealth, social class, mode of life and system of values. One is a pauper, a hooker, a mugger, a potential rapist and black. ("But what darkness could be thick enough to make you appear any less black than itself ?" the client tells him in Rathbone's translation). He skulks in the dark; inhabits the murky lower depths with the "rubbish that's been chucked from windows"; he has not "come down from anywhere", does not "intend on going up", and steers "clear of lifts the way a dog avoids water." The other is a respectable, upright, middle-class, law-abiding pillar of society who only moves "along the straightest of lines", does not "take a single step that wasn't sanctioned, authorised and legal, awash with electric light even in the slenderst nooks", and firmly believes that "there is neither peace nor law in the elemtns of Nature", that "all natural light and all unfiltered air and the unadjusted temperatures of the seasons make the world hazardous". Nevertheless, he is as much of a

whore as his opposite, as he admits; "but if I am", he says, "my brothel ... spreads out its goods under the light of the law, and shuts its doors in the evening, being registered according to law and lit by electric light".

The chance meeting is soon revealed as inevitable since, according to the client, "there is no way anyone going from one height to another can avoid coming down, for having to go back up later on, in this fashion creating the absurd situation of two self-eliminating movements ... and the moment the lift drops you off at ground level it condemns you to tramp through everything you wanted to get away from up there, through a heap of rotten memories." What begins as a simple situation of sexual solicitation rapidly develops psychological, social and even metaphysical connotations and is poetically metamorphosed into a ritualistic battle, a kind of dance of death which ends with blood "flowing on both sides." And though this blood unites the two men "like a couple of Indians next to the fire who exchange their blood surrounded by wild animals," as the client says at the end, it does not bring about the reconciliation of opposites. Rather, it yields a horrendous irony : the dealer can neither love, dominate, conquer or kill the client because he is already dead, or, in the client's words, "because first of all a man dies, then seeks his death, and finally chances upon it on the risky path from one light to another light, and says : so that's all it was".

In Egyptian slang, what Effat kept of the dialogue sounds convoluted and rings false, and the stylized set, faintly suggestive of the inside of a Buddhist monk's cell, fails to inject it with poetry or give it a philosophical, quasi-religious aura as, I think, she intended. The setting

in the original play is more powerful and dramatic. The English copy I have gives no stage directions, but the title and the dialogue vividly suggest a dark, festering void, with the lights of civilization glimmering in the distance, or a rubbish dump at the edge of a cotton field, with the heavy, humid heat thick with the stink of blood and rottenness.

"Why change the basic situation and with it the whole drift and mood of the play ?" I asked Effat, and her answer – that the relationships of men and women were more relevant to Egyptian audiences than relationships between homosexuals – did not convince me. Was it that tiny little censor inside most of us who curbed her style and made her compromise the text ?

The second part of the evening, however, was sheer delight and more than made up for the disappointment of the first. Effat was here on safe grounds. With a perfectly respectable (though over-worked) middle-class wife and mother for a heroine, and no tramps, hookers or gays loitering anywhere, the little censor could happily go to sleep. Yehya was really in her element here and quite at home with Claire Flohr's *Veronique, la vie commence a 5h.30*, (an adaptation of Armand Gatti's *La Journée d'une Infermière, ou Pourquoi les Animaux Domestiques*), translated into Arabic by Minha El-Batrawi and adapted or, rather, Egyptianized by Yehya and retitled *Al-Zuhliqah* (*The Slide* or *Le Tobogan*, according to the programme). The play is basically one long self-revealing monologue, delivered by a woman while she washes the floor. Alternately addressed at the audience and a close friend on the phone, it draws a vivid, humorous picture of the daily routine of this woman's life as a school teacher, wife and mother of two children.

Yehya's adaptation stays close to Flohr's *Veronique*, with very few minor alterations; and the fact that the daily life of a French, middle-class working mother does not differ significantly from that of her Egyptian counterpart, indeed is almost identical with it, serves as a strong reminder of the sisterhood of women across the barriers of race, nationality and cultural differences. The monologue unfolds in an empty room, with bare, white walls, very hygienic-looking, almost like a hospital, and by way of an overture, the heroine, in a white baggy nightgown hitched round her waist (a mockery of the wedding dress ?), empties a bucketful of water on the stage, splashing it everywhere, kneels and starts scrubbing with a vengeance. In this wet, bedraggled state she tells her story, one that most women are familiar with, often enacting what she describes. The effect is at once hilarious and painfully moving. In the harassed look on Nehad Abul Enein's face as she flattered or pleaded with the headmistress, wrangled with fellow teachers, or counted the minutes to the last lesson of the day; in her tense, strained voice as she barked at the pupils in the music class; in her haggard figure, shambling walk and pathetic shabbiness, I recognized many an old school-teacher and remembered with a pang how ruthless we were as kids.

One does not get to see Nehad Abul Enein on stage often. Though talented, conscientious and sensitive to mood and tone, she is seldom offered good parts; and it was really a pleasure to see her at last, thanks to Yehya, with a part she could get her teeth into. Indeed, among the many assets of Yehya as director is her knack for picking the right actors and bringing out the best in them. Notwithstanding my problem with her adaptation of the first play of the evening, I thoroughly enjoyed the performances of Hamada Shousha and Shahira Kamal as

the man and woman. Though what they said did not make much sense or add up to anything, their powerful presence and polished acting enthralled the audience. In the second play, they further displayed their virtuosity, providing all the sound effects, including street noise, parodies of songs and a variety of television programmes whenever the woman switched on her imaginary set. I saw *The Slide* twice, and would watch it a third and forth time – not to look for clues or missing links, thank God – but for its sympathetic humour, warm-hearted tolerance, spirit of camaraderie and, above all, for the sheer fun of it.

**Hani Ghanem**

***Theatre of Rebellion***

(est. 1996)

## The Beginning : *Kaspar**

A refreshing newcomer to the CIFET arena this year is the Cultural Development Fund (CDF) which is sponsoring two productions scheduled to play during the festival. It has been suggested that one of them — the Rebellion Theatre's *Kaspar* (based on Peter Handke's famous play and shown last year) — be seen by the Festival selection committee. *Kaspar* was originally sponsored by the Goethe Institute. For its current run, Rebellion applied to CDF, which also paid for the show's trip to Italy where it was invited to the Mediterranean Festival in Bari. If all goes well and no airline hitches occur, they will be seen by the selection committee today, at the final hour.

* 29 August 1996.

## Critical Condition*

Weeks on, the storm whipped up by Samir Gharib's virulent lambasting of Egyptian critics in the last issue of the CIFET (Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre) daily bulletin is still raging. The verbal assault by the head of the Cultural Development Fund was mainly targeted at the distinguished five-member committee entrusted with the choice of the two Egyptian entries in the festival's competition, but the flying shrapnel spread over a much wider area, hitting almost every 'critical' body. According to Gharib, the failure of the committee to select Hani Ghanem's *A Journey*, sponsored by the Fund, was a tragic error which not only cost Egypt the virtual certainty of winning one of the awards, but also revealed a shockingly stuffy and parochial attitude to theatre. Equally shocking, in Gharib's view, was the widespread critical neglect of the show (the only truly experimental Egyptian work in the whole festival, according to him) which amounted to almost criminal negligence. If the critics had been busy attending the sessions of the central seminar on women's theatre or the various talks given by such prominent festival guests, as Augusto Boal and Robert Brustein, Gharib implied, he might have forgiven them; unfortunately, however, they were conspicuous by their absence.

Gharib's admonitions have stirred up a hornet's nest which is still buzzing vigorously. The critics were quick to retort and the responses ranged from angry denials to vicious recriminations. Two members of the committee robustly asserted that they had been in favour of *A Journey* from the start and had fought for it till the end. A third smugly

* 9 October 1997.

and self-righteously prided herself on having rejected the show as "immoral, full of nudity and sexual perversion," declaring that if she were called upon to choose a second time she would refuse it yet again. She had done it all for the festival, she explained : "it was dangerous for the festival", she said, "to have a show representing Egypt which blatantly violated moral taboos." (Eager audiences who flocked to the play lured by this spicy, albeit inadvertent, publicity were sorely disappointed.) Of the remaining two members of the committee, one dismissed the work as "amateurish" on the grounds that it "did not observe the rules of drama" (!), while the other opted for a wishy-washy attitude, allegedly dismissing the show in the committee's closed sessions while claiming in public that he had supported it.

The divisions within the committee provided the wider critical community with a handy excuse with which to defend themselves against Gharib's charge of laxity and indifference. Some of their statements provided some of the best comedy we have seen this season, and not on the boards. First prize goes to the critic who made a virtue of not having seen the show, stoutly declared that he would never go to see it because he had heard it was immoral, then proceeded to dismiss it on the ground that it : a) contained nudity and sexual perversion, b) was a free adaptation of a "completely unknown, mysterious text" which nobody had ever heard of (Brecht's *Seven Deadly Sins*), and c) that, in any case, he was against the idea of adaptation on principle.

Other critics were not so innocently and amusingly misguided. One particularly venomous review carried the title" Satan Worshippers" and alarmingly called for an immediate investigation of the activities of this group of moral "perverts" who, according to him, had beguiled the

innocent, unsuspecting Cultural Development Fund into subsidising their subversive aims. The reviewer was clearly and directly capitalizing on the readers' memories of the recent, widely publicized arrest and trials of groups of young people accused of "Satan worship", and the really disturbing thing is that he could not have been unaware of the dangerous implications of his words. A few years ago, a similar critical witch-hunt had led to the public humiliation, and precipitated the downfull of a brilliant young director, Mansour Mohamed, who subsequently died a year later of a heart attack at the age of 32. In Mohamed's *The Game*, the sight of a belly-dancer atop a structure representing Al-Kaaba (the Moslem holy shrine in Mecca) on one side and an oil barrel on the other had virtually everybody howling for his blood.

Nothing so shocking in the *Journey*; and yet, some critics seem grimly intent on making of Hani Ghanem another CIFET sacrificial lamb. I have watched this Egyptian version of Brecht's *Die Sieben Todsunden der Kleinburger* twice, first at the Goethe Institute last year, then, in its more developed form this year during CIFET at the enchanting *Maison Zeinab Khatoun*, and, on both occasions, there was not one single broken taboo in sight. Of the rabidly denounced "nudity" there was nothing more than the usual quota of bare arms and legs and male torsos allowed on the Egyptian stage (minus the sexual titillation) except that in this case more of the male, rather than female, body was exposed. (Is this what nettles the male reviewers and has shocked the female member of the selection committee ? One wonders ! And why is it all right to have semi-nude female dancers exposed to the male "gaze" in all our commercial theatres and not at all right to have a semi-nude male rolling in the mud in a depressingly bare room without any finery

or glitter ?!) As for the so-called "sexual perversion," I am quite at a loss where to locate it, unless we regard childbirth, a woman feeling her breasts (as we are advised by gynaecologists to do regularly to detect early tumors), a gluttonous priest attending a dying person (*death* in itself is sufficiently obscene, as someone once shrewdly remarked), a young man fondling a rag doll, a young woman alternately gazing at herself in a small mirror and looking out of a *mashrabeyya* window, a woman doing her washing manually and getting progressively more and more exhausted, within sight of an old, battered and antiquated washing machine overflowing with suds, as acts denoting "sexual perversion".

I suspect that the offending article was the small wooden wheel which one of the two actresses (Brecht's two Annas) held between her bare legs, turning it rhythmically as a substitute for the sexual gratification denied her by social taboos. In this cynically ironical "boy-meets-girl" scene, the "coy mistress" at once invites and repels the lover; he stridently advances towards her, then halts in mid-career and freezes. When he finally tires of trying to wade across the clogged stream that separates them, he, after many frustrated and frustrating attempts, freezes, retires to a corner of the room to console himself with a rag doll. The woman, in her turn, retires behind a screen and gets to work with her wheel, transforming it into an arid symbol of the cycle of life.

In Brecht's *Seven Deadly* bourgeois *Sins*, a ballet cantata for which Kurt Weil composed the music, two sisters — Anna I and Anna II — set out into the world to earn enough money to build a house for their family in Louisiana. In the course oftheir journey, they visit seven

cities in each of which they are tempted by one of the deadly sins. In this political parable, the sins are portrayed in the figure of transgressions against capitalist society. In Ghanem's *Journey*, however, the family house is already too solidly there and bears in its fascinating architecture all the signs of the patriarchal value-system. As in all "environmental theatre" and "performance art" works, not only audience participation, but audience perambulation as well is absolutely required, and the burden of the process of meaning-production falls squarely on the shoulders of the viewer.

For some, Hani Ghanem's *Journey* (a fantastic guided night tour of the Zeinab Khatoun House, with a crazy dervish in rags as the guide, and nothing but the thin light of his torch to help us make our way through the narrow passages of the house and up its steep stairways) felt like a vivid, metaphoric reliving of life's journey between birth and death. The seven rooms evoked not just Brecht's seven cities, but also, through the visually riveting scenes they contained, the seven stages of human life so eloquently listed and described by Shakespeare's Jaques in *As You Like It*. For others, among whom I number myself, it felt like a pungently acid portrayal of the lot of women in the third world – perhaps the world over. From the labour of birth (with Shahira astride a tar-blackened barrel and wired up to a mass of plastic tubes) through the pangs of waiting for the "knight in shining armour" and the shy, guilty exploration of the body, to the burying and mourning of sons and husbands killed in war, the tour felt like an oppressive nightmare. And what a relief it was to emerge from the memories-encrusted rooms into the open courtyard.

But there, all the ghosts and shadows of those who once inhabited the house surrounded you and danced around you in their black cloaks, in the dark, to a miscellany of tunes that dizzyingly evoked various cultures. The next moment, they were up there, on a high terrace, still shrouded in darkness, with nothing visible but their faces, lighted up by their small torches. It was an unforgettable sight. I doubt if I shall ever walk into the Zeinab Khatoun House again without finding Ghanem's haunting images and figures lurking in the corners.

## Madness of the Gods*

Compared to previous years, 1998 has been a particularly happy year for the Free Theatre Movement with independent troupes making a strong contribution to this year's CIFET. Apart from Al-Warsha's *Spinning Lives*, which was chosen by the selection committee to represent Egypt in the international competition — thus winning for the movement official recognition and a new victory, Maher Sabry's Al-Maraia (Mirrors) group presented their technically brilliant and highly provocative *The Harem* which aired openly, for the first time in the history of the Egyptian theatre, the theme of lesbian relationships and gave a shockingly candid picture of women's lives in rich, conservative societies. For the Young Arab Artists Fund, Mohamed Abul Su'ood, the founder of the Shrapnel group, successfully directed an Egyptian version of Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba*, under the title *The Daughters of Galila*, Khalid Gala, of Encounter, presented his delightful *Shakespeare, One, Two*, and Hani Ghanem's Theatre of Rebellion took the scene by storm with their original, multi-media piece, *Madness of the Gods*. Though *Spinning Lives* failed to get any of the awards, it was the only production to get a special mention from the international jury. In their report, it was described as both "vibrant" and "luminous", and the Egyptian member of the jury, playwright and critic Abd El-Aziz Hammouda, told me in confidence that it missed the best production award by only two votes.

* 17 September 1998.

In his speech at the closing ceremony, American director George Bartenieff, the head of the international jury, also expressed his deep personal admiration for an Egyptian production which he had watched outside his official viewing schedule. It was the first time ever a fringe showing got a public commendation from a member of the international jury, let alone its head. For some inscrutable reason, neither the title of the production nor the name of its creator were spelt out. But many of those present, all the members of the jury and everyone actively involved in the festival knew that the show in question was Hani Ghanem's *Madness of the Gods*. It was the only production Bartenieff had watched outside the competition; besides, only one day before the closing ceremony, he had bumped into Ghanem by chance outside the lift on the first floor of the Cairo Sheraton, warmly shook his hand and loudly hailed him as "a great artist" in the presence of Italian-German director Roberto Ciulli, American playwright Karen Malpede, myself and a bunch of critics and journalists.

Understandably, I was deeply vexed that Bartenieff did not mention Ghanem and his work by name. In the interval between the announcement of the awards and the performance of the winning production (the Egyptian *Kohl Pillow*, conceived and directed by Intisar Abdel-Fattah, a former member of the independent theatre movement), I asked Samir Gharib, the head of the Cultural Development Fund which, together with the Goethe Institute in Cairo, had sponsored the work, for an explanation. He told me somewhat vaguely that Bartenieff had been advised not to mention Ghanem or his show by name so as not to confuse people. I could not see how calling things by their proper names could create confusion; but before I could clarify this point, or

discover the source of this curious advice, Gharib had melted away into the crowd.

I was consoled by the fact that in the meeting held with Ghanem at the Sheraton on September 10, the day before the end of the festival, to discuss the work, Roberto Ciulli had spoken warmly and with deep insight about it. He described it as an imaginative historical narrative rendered in a concrete, original way and a poignant protest against the destructive forces of the present and its erosion of human civilization. He also praised its lively and meaningful fusion of different arts and its active involvement of the audience while refusing to categorize it. "You can call it anything you like, performance art, multi-media theatre or what you will," he said; "but for me," he added, "there are only two kinds of theatre : a dead theatre and a living theatre, and Ghanem's *Madness of the Gods* certainly belongs to the latter."

The work, which falls in three movements, begins in the dimly lighted open courtyard of *Maison Zeinab Khatoun* where four demented, puerile and lollipop-sucking gods and goddesses, in white T-shirts and black shorts and trousers, alternately cajole, harass and caress the audience, who are made to sit on the floor, on a checked black and while plastic sheet, bordered with lit candles, around a gigantic ladder, and end up fencing them in with wire-mesh screens and pelting them with newspaper balls while leaping around monkey-like, screaming and yelling before disappearing. As the lights grow even dimmer and the audience squeeze through the gaps between the screens, the second movement begins. It involves our journeying through a maze of interconnected rooms, up and down narrow passages and staircases, guided by candles places on the floor. All the rooms are

ironically marked with "Exit" signs and as we travel through them, in what feels like a surrealistic trip, with loud, eerie music and sounds reverberating through the house, we come across a masked sculptor hammering away at a block of stone; a woman in black, in a big wire cage, alternately standing and falling down and stretching up an arm in desperate, silent supplication, while two black-clad monks, one miming beating a tambour he holds, skip around mischievously and try to coax the audience into joining them in a dance; two mosaics, made entirely of broken mirrors, depicting human figures; a band of cacophonous musicians squatting on the floor; a Humpty-Dumpty-like god, slumped against a wall, next to a pile of rubbish (broken bottles, empty cans, food left-overs, crumpled bits of newspapers) and following intently an imaginary football match on the gutted screen of a battered television set, while munching peanuts and laughing uproariously.

The journey takes us back to the open courtyard with its many false exit signs and to the final movement. The ladder reaching up to heaven has disappeared; and so has the checked black and white sheet. Its place is taken by a thin mattress thickly smeared with wet paint of different colours. A woman dressed in a shabby shirt and frayed pyjama trousers, rolls in the paint and repeatedly stands and falls down in the same manner as the woman in the wire-cage. One by one, the other actors emerge from the surrounding rooms and sit or stand around her, in frozen postures, except for one of the monks who moves among the audience and two actresses who circle around the courtyard with candles providing vocal accompaniment to the mixed soundtrack of classical and oriental music and loud, sinister laughter. High up, on one side, two big adjacent screens project slides of old and modern

sculptures, side by side with film shots featuring the horrors, atrocities and devastation of war.

When called upon to talk about his concept of theatre and his methods, Ghanem confessed that his early theoretical approach to theatre and acting had led him nowhere. He floundered for a while in the quagmire of theory until the great Roberto threw him a rope. One day they met at the Goethe Institute during Ciulli's first visit to Cairo. Ghanem, who had just written a paper on acting, was explaining his ideas when Ciulli suddenly interrupted : "supposing a certain work requires that you run down the street naked, and suppose a policeman catches you in the act, how can you convince him that you are an actor and not a madman ?" he asked. The question was a revelation and a turning point, Ghanem admits; he tore up his paper and stopped worrying about theories; they would not convince the policeman even if by some miracle he managed to understand them. Ghanem does not pretend to have found the answers to all the questions that bug him. But he believes he has found the right direction which could eventually lead to them. Since that memorable day, he has decided to approach theatre as "free play", to concentrate on the free play of the imagination, on awakening the sense of innocent wonder that he believes lies deep within us, adults and children alike. That is why he is not offended when his theatre is occasionally dismissed as "children's play"; rather, he takes it as a compliment, since this is precisely the effect he is trying to achieve.

Ghanem is not alone in his quest for innocence and a sense of wonder. Some of our most promising independent young artists — like Khalid Galal, Mohamed Abul-Su'ood, Ahmed El-Attar, Maher Sabry,

Effat Yehya, Nora Amin, Rasha El-Gammal, Tariq Sa'id, Caroline Khalil and Sarah Enany, among others — are mining the same veins in diverse ways and producing stirring, exciting work.

**Postscript :** *The reason why Maher Sabry and his Maraia group do not feature in a separate section in this book is that after only one production,* ***The Harem****, the troupe was disbanded when Sabry was forced to seek political asylum in the United States after the widely publicized arrest and trial of 52 gay men in what has become known as the Queen's Boat affair. He himself was not among the arrested, but being the first person to alert the foreign press and gay and human rights organizations all over the world to the persecution and harassment suffered by gays in Egypt, he knew he would not be left free for long.*

# Natural Man*

For the third time in the history of the Cairo International Festival for Experimental theatre, an independent troupe is chosen to represent Egypt in the international contest, following in the footsteps of Al-Warsha and Shrapnel who represented Egypt consecutively in 1998 (with *Spinning Lives*) and 2001 (with *Meta-Phaedra*). Hani Ghanem's *Natural Man* is yet another reworking of Peter Handke's *Kaspar* which has obsessed him since the beginning of his career as actor, dramaturge and director in the early 1990's. This is his third reworking of the play and by far the best in terms of subtlety, cunning allusion, calculated rhythm and vivid stage imagery. This time, however, he draws on a new source : the famous story of *Hay Ibn Yaqzan*, by the 12th Century Andalusian scholar and philosopher Mohamed Abu Bakr Ibn Tufayl, which treats a similar theme but in a far more optimistic vein. Like the historical or Handke's Kaspar, Ibn Tufayl's eponymous hero is a child of nature, who grows up with animals, away from human society. But, unlike him, he is not hauled into civilization to be destroyed; he lives on happily and manages to discover for himself the existence of God and to worship Him. The shadow of this romantic "noble savage" is evoked in a series of video projections only to be negated by the unfolding drama which comes across as an absurd and at once heart-rending epic of the history of humanity.

The entrance to the theatre was rebuilt to suggest an ancient Egyptian mural and you entered through a small slit by pulling apart

* 5 September 2003.

straw-coloured plastic strips, tightly drawn over the door. Inside, a dimly-lit passage, heaped high on both sides with cardboard boxes plastered over with newspapers in a variety of languages, led to the auditorium. The setting was again, as in the two earlier versions, a parody of the last supper. The stage was a semi-circular table, thrust deep into the auditorium, with a white screen at the back and the audience surrounding it on three sides. As Ghanem stepped through the back-screen, in terror and trepidation, with long, shaggy hair and almost naked, the table, neatly-laid with plates, knives, spoons and forks, automatically became a symbol of civilized living. At once, the stirring music which accompanied the initial video images gave way to a grotesque soundtrack of a deafening cacophony of overlapping voices reciting information and instructions in a hilariously absurd manner in five different languages and ranging in tone from mechanical statement and droning repetition, to hectoring, bullying and pontificating. At one point, the male voice blathering in Arabic took on the modulations typical of the majority of teachers – or sheikhs – at traditional Quranic schools, in a clear parody. Needless to say this shocked and angered many and sent others into nervous, hysterical laughter.

In desperation, Ghanem tries to obey the instructions hurled at him and finally manages to stand up and hold himself straight. As the babbling continues, Christ is evoked through a mock baptism ritual when a trapdoor in the table springs open and Ghanem sinks through it into what sounds like a water-filled basin. Baptism or ablution, it works both ways. He emerges washed, puts on a clean shirt and suit and combs and binds his hair. As he sits smugly, smoking a cigarette, the voices stop; but the screen at the back gets to work once more, flashing images of air raids, explosions, harrowing massacres and war scenes

and ends with the image of a man whirled round inside a washing machine. Then the table turns into a rail track as Ghanem lifts the top boards and wheels in from behind the screen a double pottery-moulding wheel with a lump of recalcitrant clay which he tries to shape into a human figure. The performance ends with Ghanem himself being wheeled round and round, like a piece of clay, by some invisible force as the lights fade to blackout.

Though the majority of critics and artists acknowledged the play's powerful impact and applauded its artistic economy and technical polish, not unexpectedly, some reviewers missed the point about mimicking the mode of rote-teaching used in Quranic schools and accused Ghanem of irreverence and poking fun at holy writ – a very serious charge indeed which, in this country, could get the play banned and, indeed, cost an artist his career if not his life too. Ghanem, however, remains undaunted and means to go on treading on dangerous ground.

**Karim El-Tonsi's**

***Dance Troupe***

(est. 1995)

## Out of the Cocoon*

After three years as lead dancer with the Cairo Opera Modern Dance Theatre Company, founded by Walid Aouni in 1993, Karim El-Tonsi has decided it was time to cut loose and try out his choreographic wings. Working with Aouni has been a valuable experience, he admits, and has contributed a great deal to the development of his technical skills as a dancer. But there comes a time when one needs to cut the umbilical cord, define one's own views and attitudes, and pursue one's own dreams or nightmares.

The idea of setting up his own dance theatre company had been haunting El-Tonsi for quite sometime before he took it to Al-Hanager Centre and laid it out, together with all his choreographic ideas, before its director, Huda Wasfi. At the time he was still with the Opera Modern Dance Company, rehearsing Aouni's *Last Interview* in which Nancy El-Tonsi, his sister, was starring as the Egyptian painter, Tahyia Halim, on whose life the work is based. Inevitably this created tensions and divided loyalties. But not for long. Once Wasfi gave the new company the green light to go ahead and work on the debut production began, things seemed to square themselves nicely. By August, Nancy El-Tonsi was competently dividing her time between Aouni's *Last Interview* and her brother's *Al-Radwa* (*Contentment*), and the production premiered in September, during the Experimental Theatre Festival; but since it played on the fringe and only for one night, at 11 p.m., very few people got to watch it. Whether Aouni was there that night to celebrate the official

* 7 November 1996.

"coming out" of his prize student as choreographer, I do not know; but last Saturday, when *Al-Radwa* started a three-night run at Al-Hanager before moving to other sites, I found him hugging everybody after the performance. The Tonsis had not disappointed him, nor me, for all it is worth.

Like Aouni, El-Tonsi uses movement and dance as vehicles for self-expression and self-exploration, and comes up with highly subjective imaginative constructions that have a kind of personal urgency and are imbued with the unsettling anxiety of a vaguely perceived and dimly understood dream. The movement patterns and sequences are wavering and exploratory rather than definitive; and though the composition as a whole openly draws on the vernacular kinetic vocabulary of indiginous rituals (which explains the relative absence of straight lines and flyaway movements and the abundance of circles, ripples, swirls and spirals), its attitude to these rituals and practices remains teasingly prevaricating and ambivalent.

The ambivalence is structured into the piece, or rather, it is the structural principle which organizes the varied folkloric material into a developing pattern of parallels and counterpoints, and informs it with dramatic tension and irony. It even informs the costumes design (which in the case of the female dancers suggests a modern woman's salopette and the traditional costume of the Harem's odalesques, and in the case of the dervish both a wizard and an angel) and also controls the simple design of the set — a huge mirror giving us a back view of the action on stage, splitting it, as it were, into two simultaneous contrasting scenes. In the absence of a narrative line, the sequences of images are linked through a central theme : a spiritual search for peace, harmony and faith, and the unity of body, mind and soul.

At the beginning, we dimly glimpse, in a kind of soft-focus blur, a mass of writhing human bodies inside what looks like a cylindrical gauze cocoon descending from the flies. The performance space is lined with candles of varying sizes, small ones at the front and bigger ones at the back, while a strong smell of incense wafts from the stage into the auditorium. Gradually, the human figures detach themselves from the mass, one by one, break through the cocoon and slump down on the stage floor, forming a swirling wave of bodies that slowly creeps towards us. The lighting keeps the bodies disturbingly dim while highlighting the outstretched arms and imploring hands. When five of the seven dancers have emerged, we can clearly see two figures — a female and a hooded male, dressed in the flowing robes of a dervish, a pagan priest or a spiritual healer, locked in mortal combat. The music (emphatic, arresting, and somehow calculatedly cacophonous) orchestrates the mounting tension, bringing it to a frenzied climax of unbearable pitch at the moment the woman breaks free from the clutches of the dervish to join the others outside the cocoon.

The dervish, however, is close at her heels, and in the scenes that follow he becomes alternately the focus of aspiration for this group of lost souls who are looking for a saviour, and a sleek, sly devil who leads them into frenzied, orgiastic ceremonies that make them slaves to his will. Frequently, the five female dancers, led by Nancy El-Tonsi and Nancy Adham, vividly recall the old Greek Bacchae, and Karim El-Tonsi's musicollage, carefully picked out from many stirring sources, confirms this impression. But against the Dionysian principle of chaos, spontaneity and irrationality represented by the female dancers, the show pits the Apollonian principle of order and rationality and embodies it in the only male figure among the fugitives from the

cocoon. This male figure, played by Karim El-Tonsi, engages the sensual dervish (played by Hamdi El-Arabi) in battle, but the conflict remains unresolved. At the end of the battle, the frenzied, raucous music with its maddening pagan beat stops, and the dancers who had fallen to the floor in an agony of feverish, delirious writhing become suddenly still.

On one of the two nights I was there, this sudden pause was greeted with huge applause from the auditorium. It was a pity, since it spoilt the effect of the eloquent closing sequence. As we savour the silence – welcome relief after all the dervish music and Zar beats – the characters, including the dervish, now divested of his garment, sit up slowly and look around them in wonder, like people waking from a nightmare; then they begin to creep slowly towards each other and hudle together in awed silence, forming a beautiful *tableau vivant.* At this moment, *Al-Radwa* seems to outstrip its synopsis as printed in the programme. To me, it seemed to leave the simple critique of rituals, spiritual sedatives and superstitions far behind and to say that the spiritual thirst and search will continue, just as the conflict between the Dionysian and the Apollonian impulses in all of us is bound to do. If we must look for comfort, it seemed to add, we can only find it in human closeness and solidarity.

*Al-Radwa* will speak to different people differently. One thing, however, will be unanimously acknowledged : that Karim El-Tonsi has proved a genuinely talented, intellectually serious, and highly promising choreographer.

# The Way of All Flesh

After launching his Dance Theatre Troupe in 1996 with *Al-Radwa*, followed within six months by *The Other Side of Silence*, Karim El-Tonsi has embarked on a new and exciting route and decided to explore for himself and his generation the expressive potential of movement away from formal dance. For three and a half months he worked with a group of young men and women of varied social and cultural backgrounds, most of them with no previous acting experience whatsoever, and the result was *Thoughts and Impressions* presented at Al-Hanager last week.

In the programme, El-Tonsi describes this movement piece as a "demonstration" and a "collage" and adds : "I am dealing here with raw material and it should be presented raw, with no flavours or spices." Such statements always make me feel suspicious : they seem like attempts to forestall any formal artistic appraisal of the work and to shift the responsibility for whatever faults or shortcomings onto the performers. Worse still, the statement is a blatant contradiction in terms since any "dealing with raw material" implies a degree of interference with its raw state, and since, in this instance, the interference obviously involved a substantial degree of artistic framing and organization through music and lighting.

Fortunately I only read El-Tonsi's note after the performance and can therefore understand what he is getting at and forgive him his atrocious way of putting it (Dancers and musicians are notorious for verbal impotence and messing up words). What comes across from

*Thoughts* is a postmodernist impulse to break through the defined categories of meaning and discursive thought and reach towards a kind of *concrete* thinking through the body — a process, unconceptual by definition, where ideas are replaced by volatile and evanescent intuitive states of being. To achieve this kind of concrete thinking (a term coined by existentialist philosophers) through the body, the performer has to submit to what Zeami, instructing the *Noh* dancers in the fifteenth century, called the excruciating "dialectical tension between what is seen by the mind (*tai*) and what is seen by the eyes(*yu*)". In his book *Between Theatre and Anthropology*, Richard Schechner quotes Tatsuro Ishii who has investigated the later writings of the *Noh drama* instructor Zeami on this : "*tai* can be interpreted as a fundamental texture in acting dependent on the mind of a performer, and *yu* is the outer, visual manifestation." More recently, and in the same vein, Grotowski described the performer's task as "an act of self-penetration" which "reveals" and "sacrifices the innermost part of" the self — "the most painful, that which is not intended for the eyes of the world." It is in this context that we should understand El-Tonsi's description of "the material of this performance" as "so sensitive", and one might add, recklessly honest and daring.

What "is not intended for the eyes of the world" is what we get in *Thoughts and Impressions* through what seems like impulsive, free movement, accompanied by a musical collage which ranges from North African folk songs to the film soundtracks of *Kama Sutra* and *The English Patient.* The underlying principle one detects in the movement sequences is one of "flow" punctuated with moments of arrest and formally controlled outbursts of collective energy. Framing this kinetic flux of writhing, swirling, slithering, rolling, sliding, slipping,

crawling, creeping and simple walking movement is a sensitive lighting design where blue and red – projected in different degrees of intensity, often shading off into smoky, sunset purple or fading into a foggy, grey pallor — are the dominant colours. The rhythms of day and night, ebb and flow, merging and separating control the process of communication and meaning-production both on stage and in the auditorium. Audience and performers alike fall under the hypnotic spell of distant primeval rhythms and dimly remembered longings and nebulous fears.

In one mesmerising, trance-like moment, the rites of ablution, physical purification and purgation, merged with the pagan fertility rites when Nabila Hamdi and Mona Prince (nearly reduced to silhouttes by the lighting), having repeatedly washed themselves in the sea (made of the swirling bodies of the other actors) and communicated to us, almost physically, their extreme sensuous pleasure in the act, plunge into the waves and embrace the wavy male recumbent bodies, riding and rolling on them, and diving beneath them. The powerful and vivid sensuality of this metaphoric act came across as an overwhelming, primitive assertion of life as a pagan, undifferentiated explosion of animal energy free of all cultural taboos and moral inhibitions and beyond any categorization of good and bad. The performers' unbridled urge to liberate their bodies and be ruled by them, their exhilarating physical abandon (as raw as you can get), and the intensity and seeming spontaneity of their gestural and physical interactions combined to project, perhaps for the first time on the Egyptian stage, a concrete image of human sexuality in the broader, unsexist meaning of the word.

What was particularly moving about El-Tonsi's *Thoughts* was its acknowledged hesitancy and painful uncertainty — its implicit recognition of the fragility and transience of the body and its defiant celebration of it, with all its imperfections, as the only sure thing we have. This explains why the body here, unlike in most dance theatre, did not feature as an instrument of formal, aesthetic composition, was not reduced to lines and masses to compose spatial patterns, but, rather, was highlighted in all its pathetic vulnerability, sensual appeal and overpowering, transitory eloquence. What one carries away from *Thoughts* is not a group of thoughts and ideas but a painful physical sensation of being physically alive — an anguished realisation of the weight of being and an ecstatic revelling in the capacity to "touch", and through touching discover magical epiphanies.

## All the World is a Cabaret*

You would think that with an Italian mother and an Egyptian father, choreographer and dancer Karim El-Tonsi would be Mediterranean through and through and would find in the ancient civilizations of that basin enough cultural food for his imagination. And, indeed, in at least two of the five shows he choreographed and directed since he launched his own Contemporary Dance Theatre Company under the auspices of Al-Hanager at the end of 1994, he drew heavily upon the popular Egyptian cultural heritage, and managed to effectively display and foreground its rich hybrid texture by resetting it, through movement and music, in the broader cultural context of the region. *Al-Radwa* (1996) and *Maqamat* (1998) consisted of sequences of meticulously executed exotic images centring upon women and featuring their life, past and present, in its positive and negative aspects, in its brighter and darker sides, within the general framework of a hybrid Arab-African-Mediterranean culture.

Sadly I missed El-Tonsi's first production which he performed with his company in Ewart Hall at the AUC in 1995 within a few months of his leaving the Opera Contemporary Dance Theatre Company where he had spent years and made his mark as a gifted dancer; but the title of that production, *Transmissions*, suggests that, like *Al-Radwa* and *Maqamat*, it was deeply preoccupied with cultural correspondences and cross-currents. In *The Other Side of Silence* (1997), which was more meditative, less physically and visually exuberant, and sombre in mood, the balance tipped slightly in favour of the European shores of

* 17 June 1999.

the Mediterranean, and the work subtly communicated a pervasive sense of alienation. It seemed to me at the time that El-Tonsi was going through a kind of crisis of identity both on the cultural and personal levels.

The subsequent *Thoughts and Impressions* (the result of a movement workshop at Al-Hanager based on improvisations with a group of young actors at the beginning of 1998 and focusing, as far as I can remember, quite openly on cultural, social, and sexual alienation) seemed to have a cathartic effect on El-Tonsi. May be he discovered that he was not alone in his cultural and personal dilemmas and that many of his generation, even those whose official documents certify that both their parents are Egyptian (a word that essentially denotes ethnic, religious and cultural multiplicity), feel equally alienated and marginalized in the current, increasingly repressive social and cultural scene in Egypt.

In any case, by the end of 1998, El-Tonsi had recovered his former zestful acceptance, even celebration, of his multiple cultural identity (I am tempted to call it his true 'Egyptianness') and jubilantly embarked upon another hedonistically exhilarating voyage into his mixed heritage, and to that part of it nearest to his heart — the world of women. His *Maqamat*, which featured a memorable women's Turkish bath scene, came across as a lusciously colourful and sensuously lush pageant which vividly combined visual elements from Italian opera with details from the paintings of orientalists, projected them in a light-hearted, tongue-in-cheek mood, and passionately underlined that most endearing aspect of El-Tonsi's work — his adoration of the female sex.

His latest *Extravaganza* (which was tried out on the audience for three nights last week at the French Cultural Centre which sponsored it,

and is due for a longer run at Al-Hanager at the end of this month) is even more exuberant and culturally defiant than the *Maqamat*. The cultural scope is here extended beyond the Middle East, Africa, and the Mediterranean to embrace the dance and musical heritage of the New World. It was not surprising, since El-Tonsi is a graduate of the AUC and studied ballet and modern dance in London and New York. What is surprising, exciting, refreshing, and robustly invigorating, however, is the carnivalesque, burlesque, and vigorously youthful thrust of the work.

Under the eyes of his ancestors, framed in old, faded, family photographs which frame the stage in the form of an arc and endow it with a nostalgic, romantic, old world atmosphere suggestive of the beginning of this century, Karim El-Tonsi and his delightful, well-trained dancers (Nora Moussa, Yara Idris, Doaa Mohamed, Amina Naguib, Walaa Mohamed, Marwa Motaleb, Ahmed Refaat, Ahmed Samir, and Mahmoud Moatassem) proceeded to joyfully flaunt their cultural multiplicity and assert their right as legitimate heirs to all the cultures of our global village. As natural heirs to the global cultural heritage (in the fields of dance and music), they can choose to relate to it in the here and now nostalgically, seriously, or playfully, or dissociate themselves from it to watch it critically and parody it humourously.

To the tunes of a clever musical college, composed of famous numbers and melodies from American musicals and films (mainly *Chicago*, *The English Patient*, and *Shakespeare in Love*), as well as Fathi Salama's *Nahawand*, Cheb Fedel's *Male Habti*, *Mozart The Egyptian*, and original musical items by Lili Baniche, Claude Challe and Carlos Campos, they combined various modes of dance (oriental, ball-room, classical ballet, American show biz, Spanish and Latin

American), and with every step and movement transformed their bodies into living cultural bridges and claimed the world as their own. In their presence, and under their graceful, nimble feet, the stage of the cosy theatre at the French Cultural Centre became the whole world, or rather, the world became their appropriated stage, physical space, and cultural playground.

Karim's simple conception of the show as an extravaganza consisting of a number of parodic items presented in a cabaret (and possibly inspired by Lisa Manelli's famous song *Life is a Cabaret*) was complemented and enriched by Sherif El-Boraii's multiple stage-set which suggested several settings enclosed within each other and superimposed upon each other; with a few simple, carefully chosen props (old photographs, an arc of coloured bulbs, a curtain made of strings of beads, a dressing table and a piano), the stage became alternately and, sometimes, all at once : the stately home of an old family; a seedy music hall, American bar or night club; a sleazy oriental joint; a ball room; a posh teenagers' party; and a nursery where children indulge in fantasies and mimic grown-ups and what they see in cinema, on stage, or on television.

The final impression was one of liberation, tolerance, integrity, and, also – quite poignantly – transience. As Karim and his wonderful butterflies skipped blithely across many cultural fields, one could not help wondering how long they can guard their freedom, sustain their sense of global integration and of being at home in the world and its human heritage against the winds of fanaticism, cultural fundamentalism, and nationalistic bigotry. But then, this painful sense of transience invariably assaults one whenever the metaphor of the world as a stage or life as cabaret is projected from the boards. And in *Extravaganza*, it was the source of inspiration and the moving spirit.

**Nora Amin's**

*La Musica*

**(Amin worked with The Movement since 1990 and Sharpnel since 1992 before founding her own company in 1999)**

# S'mothering'*

The traditional idealization of the mother in Egyptian culture is heavily represented in the arts and it is extremely rare to find a play, a painting, a sculpture or a work of fiction that diverges from this view. A notable exception in fiction is Ihsan Abdul Quddus's *Cul-de-sac* (made into a famous movie starring Faten Hamama) which features an unprincipled mother turning her house after her husband's death into a pleasure haunt and using her daughters as bait. I also remember an old radio drama serial, called *Bitter Honey*, in which the late Zuzu Nabil (immortalized in the popular mind by her performance as the legendary Sheherazade in another radio serial based on the *Arabian Nights*) played a maniacal mother, unhinged by her husband's betrayal, who locks up her daughter, forbidding her any communication with the outside world, and in her frenzied desire to protect her attempts to murder the only man who tries to break through her siege to save the daughter.

It is only in cinema, and particularly old movies, where bad mothers make an occasional appearance, though in most cases, they are either unfortunate women who bear their children out of wedlock and are forced to desert them and spend the rest of their lives, and the film, pining for them until the final lachrymose reunion, or vain and beautiful women who rebel against their humble life with a good husband, elope with a rich lover or a handsome knave and live to regret it. But the most remarkable and shocking example of maternal abberration in Egyptian movies occurs in *Lahn Hubi* (*My Love's Melody*, a musical, starring Farid Al-Atrash and Sabah) where the mother, the seductive Zuzu

* 7 December 2000.

Shakib, uses her daughter as a cover for her illicit adulterous affair with Mahmoud Al-Meligi (the notorious villain of the screen) by consenting, albeit temporarily, to their (the lover's and daughter's) engagement. Predictably, she is suitably punished; shamed before the world, she falls out of a window and breaks her neck.

Unfailingly, whenever the idealized image of the mother is inverted in cinema or any other art, the reason is pronouncedly and, more often than not, simplistically didactic. A striking and particularly clumsy example of this are two successive shots in the film version of *Cul-de-sac* which contrast the heroine's profligate mother, in an evening dress, raising a glass of wine and winking mischievously, with the homely image of a fat, provincial mother, veiled and kneeling on a prayer carpet. In the first, the mother's sexuality is framed and coded as a sign of depravity; in the second, it is completely glossed over and the shapeless, heavily covered body is consigned to child-caring, housework and worship. The black-and-white attitude which informs such representations allows little room for any real questioning of the popular stereotypes of the mother, or any serious in-depth exploration of the tensions and darker sides of the mother-child relationship. Fictional ideal mothers invariably raise fictional ideal sons and daughters, officiously attentive and vociferously affectionate. If any tension erupts, it is usually on account of a virtue carried to excess. A mother's inordinate love for her son or daughter may become possessive and breed tensions when they decide to take partners. To guard the ideal-mother image against such common human weaknesses, the jealous and nagging mother-in-law was developed as a comic stereotype and the late Mary Munib became its cherished icon.

It is against such a background of mother-representations that Nora Amin's recent and daringly iconoclastic *The Box of our Lives* must be seen and appreciated. Amin gives her play a different title in Arabic, calling it *Al-Dafeerah* (*The Braid*), and the images in both titles, which she realizes visually on stage in the set and movement, complement each other and seem designed to point straight to the core of the play. Two lonely, frightened and obviously traumatized nameless women, a mother and her daughter, cooped up in a tiny, derelict, dark and windowless room (the box of the English title), are hopelessly interlocked, as in a fatal embrace, in a love-hate relationship, with death as the only hope of release. Of the history of these women, we are told nothing; indeed, they seem to exist outside history, in a timeless vacuum. With no access to the succession of night and day, and a single lamp, constantly burning and casting lurid shadows on the walls, the stage image banishes chronological time, and with it the possibility of an objective narrative, however minimal, in terms of events, actions, motives, responses and consequences. What we encounter in this empty narrative space are not dramatic characters and a story, but significant moments and emotional states — fears and longings, remembered experiences and relived memories. And just as the absence of chronological time redefines time as undifferentiated experiential space and significant moments, the forgoing of traditional characterization redefines the bodies of the performers (Amin and Basant Mohsen) on stage : they are not perceived as semiotic representations of fictional identities but as a stage on which historical remembrances, social, personal and collective female traumas are reenacted in the hope of achieving a degree of catharsis.

Like many contemporary feminist theatre makers in the West, Nora Amin (who is also the author of two novels, two plays, and three collections of short stories, a trained dancer and gifted actress with memorable performances in experimental versions of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Edward Bond's *Lear*, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* and Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*, and who works as a translator at the Academy of Arts and a part-time aerobics coach and masseuse to support herself and her daughter) displays an obsessive and urgent need for self-expression and self-exploration. In both her work and life, and in her case the two are coextensive, the driving force is the attempt to discover her own subjectivity and construct her own self-image amid many possible identities and inherited role-models. Like many feminist writers of her generation, she believes that the route to female subjectivity lies through the forbidden body, its physicality, desires, traumas and memories and, of course, all the taboos inscribed on it. In her work, the body becomes a subversive, disruptive force which, in Julia Kristeva's words "disturbs identity, system and order .... does not respect borders, positions, rules", and is the site of the "in-between, the ambiguous, the composite".

Though heavily autobiographical, an intimate register of her memories and emotional experiences, Amin's work defies the traditional concept of autobiography defined, by Dutch feminist Critic Mieke Kolk, as "a life-story fixed in a reconstruction of chronological time, inserting logic and causality in its moving from begginings to the end". It belongs more in the area of what Griselda Pollock has called auto-history – a pre- symbolic, unmediated space, filled with naked, highly personal experience, acted-out, rather than represented, in an everlasting present-experience which, because dissociated from

recognizable identity models and chronological time, is never closed or finalised and, paradoxically, for this very reason, never really strictly personal. Here, as Kolk puts it, "the highly personal as a route-de-passage reflects, emotionally, critically, our historical and collective individualization".

Shrewdly, Amin set her performance of *The Box* in the Townhouse Gallery – a spacious flat in an old-fashioned, battered, but still elegant building off Champollion street. Climbing up the stairs to the third floor and waiting outside the door felt like playing the ritual of women visiting each other in their historically specified intimate space : the home. When the door opened and we filed in, we found our selves in a darkened, empty hall with no chairs, and took our places on the rug-covered floor. Facing us was another room, on a slightly elevated level, and it too was dark except for a single lamp hanging low over Amin's head, as she sat in an old armchair, completely still except for her hands which were methodically plaiting the hair of some shapeless figure, completely lost in the dark, sitting at her feet. The expression on her face and movement of her hands alternately expressed tenderness and pent-up rage, affection and resentment, protectiveness and hints of violence. Her ghostly make-up, black dress and the effect of being lighted from above gave her a macabre appearance, suggesting a mummified corpse. But most disturbing of all were the mysterious strips of packing tape encircling her hands. We eventually discover similar strips binding her feet, and the daughter's hands and feet as well, reminding us of the familiar practice of similarly binding hostages to prevent their escape.

The plaiting done, Amin pulled a black plastic bag over the head of the still figure, smoothing it round its shoulders like a dress, then patted it rigidly, adding, after a short expectant pause, in a bitterly reproachful tone : "No thanks ?!" The plaited head quietly bends and rests on her knee and she begins to hum a popular lullaby in a strained voice which slowly rises in a tense, ominous crescendo ending with a violent movement which flings the still figure away from her, hurling it to the floor. The light reveals a thin, frightened young woman, dressed like a boy in long grey trousers and a long-sleeved grey top. Like a startled animal, she scurries frantically round the bare room, on her hands and knees, on the dusty, rubbish-strewn floor. As we follow her, we trace the features of the set : three bare stone walls, two shuttered and boarded up windows at the back with a large blank white sheet of paper in between. Stretching across the room at the top is a greenish-grey fat and leaking plumbing pipe which drips with relentless regularity into a kind of rift which cuts through the floor of the room in a slightly wavy line stretching from the back wall to the auditorium.

The set (by Ibrahim Gharib) palpably evokes female and male sexual organs in intercourse and acts as a grimly ironical comment on the frustration of the two women while rendering in visual terms their obsessive fears and longings. The severely economical verbal dialogue takes the form of sudden, inconsequential and often monological eruptions, alternately lyrical and violent, aggressive and pleading, resurrecting vague memories of loss, of love, of fear and pain. The lyrical passages are often accompanied by Hisham Gabr's stirring music or played against a background of distant street sounds alluding to the bustling life outside. In both cases, the contrast between the

words and sounds on the one hand and the dismal reality of the visual surroundings on the other is excrutiatingly painful.

The movement, designed by Amin, complements the verbal text, filling in the gaps between the utterances, generating new and daring images which shock us out of any ordinary perception or stock interpretation of the situation into a confrontation with the unspeakable. Unforgettable is the image of the daughter, crouching on the floor, frantically scraping an empty tin dish with a knife while the mother recites from a thick volume (obviously some holy book) in an outlandish tongue; the mother stabbing herself with a lipstick and running it round her womb and up to her throat in a mixture of agony and ecstasy while the daughter frantically smears her mouth with another; the mother tying herself to her arm-chair with sticky tape then trying to break free; the mother lying on her back on the chair, her open legs resting on its back and her head dangling in the air while the daughter sits across her, on top, like a baby coming out of her womb head first or / and a surrogate lover; the daughter ripping off her clothes and standing presumably naked (though for censorship reasons she was on this occasion dressed in transparent plastic and blue cloth) while the mother meticulously wraps her round with cellophane; the daughter tenderly cuddling then viciously beating a ragdoll when it starts squeaking "mummy", or sitting on her mother's lap, supposedly naked, and pulling a black plastic bag over her head and fastening it hard round her neck with sticky tape; or, finally, the mother ripping off her black dress after the daughter's death, revealing a flesh-coloured leotard (suggesting her naked body), inscribed all over with Arabic writing, in bold letters, and stepping off stage, into the auditorium and out of the flat. Typically, as in many feminist performances, the final action is

vexingly ambivalent : does it imply release and points in the direction of wholeness and freedom, or is it simply the first step in a repetition of the same cycle ? It is a puzzle the audience take away with them.

*The Box of our Lives* is the first production of La Musica independent theatre group founded by Nora Amin last year with a modest grant from the Cultural Development Fund. It is an exciting, challenging beginning and if the company lives up to the expectations they have raised and maintains the same standards of integrity, courage and artistic excellence achieved this time, they may prove a vital force in the battle to change the Egyptian theatrical landscape.

## Crying in the Wilderness*

On 31 October last year, I reviewed Nora Amin's production *La Musica 2eme*, which she performed during the first Jadayel festival. Based on a similarly titled play by Marguerite Duras about the rocky and tubulent relationship of a divorced couple, the production, which took three years to prepare, was the fruit of a long and intensely personal dialogue between Amin and the original text. In the process, she wove into the script a lot of her own intimate thoughts and feelings, changing the structure, language and order of scenes. "The Durassien text", in her words, became "a 'pretext' to show my own interpretation of the crisis and fantasy of that desperate couple."

Amin's deep personal involvement with Duras's text, I wrote then, accounted for the strength of the production – its emotional intensity and highly charged atmosphere – as well as its irritating vagueness and dramatic diffuseness. What Amin, who played the woman, needed, I noted, was the eye of a director to make sure that what she strove to communicate was bodied forth in a concrete and more precise theatrical language. This is not to say that she always needs a director whenever she acts in her own productions. Two years before *La Musica 2eme*, she wrote and directed *The Box of Our Lives* and took on the part of the mother with great success. The idea of someone else directing never crossed anybody's mind then. In *The Box*, however, Amin didn't have the shadow of Duras to grapple with. The complex relationship of mother and daughter, drawn from life rather than books, was clearly

* 27 February 2003.

focused, sharply outlined and carefully detailed; its impact, therefore, was nearly devastating.

In her latest production, seen last week at the small theatre of the AUC Falaki Centre, Nora takes up another play by Duras. *Les viaducs de la Seine-et-Oise* (1960) is about an elderly couple involved in the gruesome murder of a deaf-mute relative. In a later version, published in 1968, it was retitled, for some inscrutable reason, *L'amante anglaise* — inscrutable because the only English thing in the play is a cherished plant of English mint. Nora used the later version, translated it herself into Egyptian Arabic, making no alterations, and wisely decided this time to give her undivided attention to directing. The play, however, was consciously interpreted and treated as a sequel to *La Musicà 2^eme^*.

In a note in the play's programme, Amin writes : "To continue the story of that man and that woman from *La Musica 2^eme^*, who buried together the corpse of their love story, Claire and Pierre Lannes appear here to announce the mutual murder each of them committed, to tear all the ties of common life between them. The metaphoric corpse becomes here the actual corpse of Marie-Therese, the cousin of the wife." To further elucidate her directorial conception and enlighten the audience or, rather, channel their reception and interpretation of the performance in the direction she wants, she adds : "If the young couple of *La Musica 2^eme^* had continued living together and suffering together, they would have been right in front of us now ... interrogating themselves about the horrors they did and the mutual suicide they committed." Amin's note ends, in a somewhat poetic vein, with a description of how she understands Duras's text and, implicitly, of how we should read the performance. "It is a fantasy of passion and insanity," she cautions, "of

the elimination and identification with the other, of closing oneself, of opening up the imagination towards the desert of sufferance and violence where the wind comes and carries away everything, leaving the memory naked and the heart split in two."

Fortunately, I make a virtue of never reading what directors write about their work before watching it first. They are free to express their views and theories of course; but we, the audience, are also entitled to receive and interpret the show according to our own lights, without any interference, persuasion or preconditioning. The performance I saw began with Amin reading in a voice-over, in the dark, Duras's note on the play which explains how it was inspired by a real murder in which a woman murdered her husband, hacked the corpse and disposed of the pieces by dropping them from a bridge into passing trains. The poor victim's body was not only scattered all over the place (like that of Osiris in the ancient Egyptian myth), but its bits ended up travelling up and down the country as well. When the recital ended, loud, eerie music and sound effects (by Nader Sami) filled the hall and colour slides featuring dismembered limbs, a naked, mutilated female body covered in blood, rail tracks running parallel and meeting in the distance, huge, gory stains and swirling pools were projected over and over, in quick succession, on a screen above our heads.

When the lights came on, we discovered that the stage was a T-shaped catwalk, with us sitting in three block, two on either side of the vertical board facing the third across the horizontal one. From my place, behind the T-top, the vertical line of the catwalk, which stretched before me to the end of the hall and – save for the occasional sauntering of the police inspector – remained empty and unused the whole time,

suggested at once and persistently a point where opposites can meet, but never do, and a dividing line, an insurmountable barrier. The fact that it ended with a blank wall made it into an actual and metaphoric dead end, triggering feelings of emptiness, hopelessness and desolation and voicing a silent, ironical comment on the detective's efforts to reach the truth every time he stepped on it. How it looked to the people on the other side and how they felt about it, I shall never know. But everyone could see that while the inspector moved freely on all sides and among the audience, the couple – Claire and Pierre Lannes – sat throughout the performance on either side of the T-top, facing each other, without once leaving their places, establishing contact or seeming to notice each other.

In this visual setup, Amin was echoing the structure of the play which is equally divided into two separate scenes, lasting an hour each, with one focusing on the husband and the other on the wife. In terms of language, tone, emotional texture, mood and logic, they stand in sharp contrast. The interrogation which seems at the beginning to occupy itself with the details and motives of the murder and ascertaining the identity of the culprit, gradually turns into an investigation of the characters of both husband and wife and their relationship from two diametrically opposed points of view. Every question reveals a facet, a painful lack, a ruptured tie, a hidden anxiety or stirs a memory, casts a shadow or provokes an emotion. As the revelations accumulate, drawing the couple further and further apart and widening the gulf between them, they effect a gradual subtle change in the interrogator.

The detached observer, keen on objective facts and plausible motives, gets caught up in the unfolding, psychological narrative and,

before the knows it, becomes personally and emotionally involved and consciously takes sides. In the first scene, one senses in the slightly sharp and aggressive tone of his questions his suspicion and growing dislike of the husband, while in the scene with the wife, he shows sympathy and seems drawn to her world with a mixture of fascination and horror. Its ardent sexuality, religious fervour, weird hallucinations, grotesque images, profound tenderness and inconsolable sorrow intrigue and disturb him; he struggles to make sense of it as if his own personal fate depended on it but finally retreats in fear despite Claire's entreaties to go on being her friend and talking to her. The audience try to make sense of it too and come up with several explanations, but never a single definite one.

Claire could have killed Marie-Therese out of jealousy, because of her affair with Alfonso, whom she wanted for herself, or because she thought she had taken her place in her husband's bed as well as his kitchen. Or may be she identified with her sensual cousin and was vicariously committing suicide by shedding her blood, which is also her own. Or, perhaps (since she goes to communion every day, gives the severed head a Christian burial and regrets that her passion for her beloved, married officer, had drawn her away from the Lord) her deep religious sense made her feel that both she and her cousin were sinful and deserved to be punished. Or is it possible that she committed the murder in a kind of blackout and found herself afterwards faced with the body ? Or, perhaps, never committed it at all and thought she did in one of her insane spells ? These and other explanations are suggested but none is preferred over the others and the audience are kept suspended between possibilities.

The atmospheric music, sensitive deployment of light and shadow and careful manipulation of the lighting in terms of intensity, shape, direction and colour, as well as the original composition of the stage and set provided the actors with a fitting frame which bolstered their performances. Of the three, Kamal Soliman was the only professional and his experience was an asset. He played the husband with impressive economy and skill. Though the audience were told clearly at the outset that in the real murder story Duras used, the wife confessed to the crime and spent a term in prison, Soliman managed to capture and frame the elusive hints Duras plants in the dialogue to raise suspicion about the husband's guilt. The audience responded as in a murder thriller, with attentive silence charged with suspense, hanging on his every word and frantically trying to decode what he says or find a clue to what he leaves unsaid. By the end of the scene, both he and the audience realize he is guilty – but of a crime not punishable under the law.

Maysa Zaki, a brilliant theatre critic who appeared on the stage once before in Effat Yehya's *Desertscape* (in which Amin also played) and occasionally appears in the graduation film projects of the cinema institute, was a lucky choice and a wonderful surprise. Though much younger than Claire, she brought to the part warmth, tenderness and a wistful charm without sacrificing the character's innate vitality, psychic energy, capriciousness and terrible capacity for love and pain. She handled the tonal shifts and changes of mood with ease and confidence, always with an undercurrent of poignant pathos, and her sensitive, unmade up face reflected every fletting shade and nuance of feeling. In a second, it could change from cloudy to sunny, grow pensive or light up with joy, become childlike and helpless or embittered and wrinkled

with age. The only thing missing in her performance was an intimation of murderous violence. One could never imagine this charming, lovable, infinitely sympathetic and pathetic creature as a homicidal maniac. Her talk of cutting up the corpse and the difficulty she had disposing of the head and similar gory details had a strange ring and sounded like the delusions of a wracked mind. But, perhaps Nora Amin meant us to take it this way to consolidate the metaphoric status of the murder. Still, I would have preferred the occasional glint of madness.

*The English Lover* had only a four-day run, hardly enough time for a performance to set and take its final shape. It is supposed to play in Alexandria next month, and until then, I hope Amin invests the time in honing Ahmad El-Salakawi's performance as the police inspector. He is a fine-looking young man, with a good voice, supple physique and strong, attractive stage-presence. His acting, however, was often brash in tone and lacked conviction. He needs to learn the skill of projecting energy towards his fellow actors as well as the audience, whether silent or talking, and to modulate his voice and movement to suit the emotional timber of the moment. He was at his best in the scene in which he stood behind Claire's chair and silently hugged her head between his hands. But that was largely the work of the director and the lighting. Hopefully too, Nora will remember to lower the level of the catwalk to give her future audiences a better view of the actors and save them the trouble of craning their necks for two hours and ending up with a painful cramp.

The time given to the slide projection also needs to be severely cut, particularly in the long blackout between the two scenes. Initially, they are supposed to trick the audience into believing they are about to watch

a replay of a murder story full of suspenseful horror and gory details. But what good are they halfway through except to serve as reminders of the starting point – the quest for motives – and prepare for Claire's appearance ? And surely, this does not require ten whole tedious minutes of flashing and reflashing those rather childish slides. If Nóra addresses these weakness and controls more carefully the rhythms of speech and silence in the play, she can guarantee her Alexandria audiences a tighter and better tuned performance than the one we saw in Cairo. She will also do well not to try to raise the ghost of *La Musica 2^eme^* and try to foist it on the audience, making those who didn't see it feel they would have understood *The English Lover* better (or discovered the identity of the mysterious character to which the title refers) had they done so. I watched the former and I can assure you that it never even crossed my mind while I watched the latter. The connection is only in Nora's head.

# Singing With Their Bodies*

The new extension to the British Council building, which accommodates the new Knowledge and Learning Centre, looked impressive — elegant, well-proportioned and in harmony with the old architecture. The garden, however, was a sorry sight. I had arrived early, in plenty of time to look around. From the new, spacious entrance hall I strayed into the open, tiled courtyard which houses the cafeteria for a cup of coffee and a cigarette, then wandered round the white fence of thin wooden boards to look at what was once a charming garden. The makeshift work sheds with their ugly corrugated roofs crammed into it for months during the renovation project — a veritable eyesore — had mercifully disappeared, but the ground was still covered thick with rubble. Under the night sky, it looked ravaged and forlorn and the few old trees, which bordered it on two sides, seemed somehow to increase the air of desolation.

It was pitch dark except for a blinding spotlight on ground level and I made out the silhouettes of some people busy doing something and what looked like a glistening patch of water. The people, I soon discovered, were Nora Amin and her artistic crew — Nader Sami with his guitar, Tamer El-Demerdash, the soundtrack designer, at the sound-system board, fiddling with the keys, and Bakr, her technician. As for the glistening thing, it wasn't a patch of water after all, though it looked very much like one. It was a low platform covered with a shiny black plastic sheet and I wondered what it was doing there on top of all that

* 13 March 2003.

rubble. It was not until I glimpsed those still, recumbent figures, their heads meeting at the centre of the platform while their bodies spread out fanlike to form a circle that I realised that this was our stage for the night and that this derelict, draughty spot, covered in the middle with some carpets and several rows of chairs, was our theatre. You can't beat that for an untraditional performance space. A flyer handed out at the door had thoughtfully warned the audience to "please be careful when you enter the garden area as it is dark and the ground is uneven." Many people stumbled and nearly fell over all the same. But incredible as the choice of site seemed, it was curiously apt. Rugged, bleak and desolate, it struck me as perfectly suited to a show intended to "illustrate the experiences, thoughts and dreams of nine young Egyptian women," as the flyer announced.

The *Nine* to whom the show refers in its title are Reem, Yasmeen, Maha, Rania, Rasha, Mounira, Iman, Nefertari and Niveen. Significantly, no family names, no reference to paternity in the programme. It is as if these young women, none of whom was ever involved in theatre before, wanted to define themselves away from and against the labels, roles and identities imposed upon them by a conservative patriarchal culture and, moreover, to define it in a new kind of language which is neglected, suppressed, or frowned upon by that culture — namely, body language. Over six months these young women — all in their twenties — were involved in a workshop sponsored by the British Council as part of its "Connecting Futures" activities which seeks to encourage greater cooperation and communication between young people in Egypt and the UK. With the help of director Nora Amin — the only Egyptian female director committed to and conversant with physical theatre as a mode of artistic

and existential expression — and with some assistance in the later stages from Deborah Barnard (of the Ludus Dance Company in Lancaster), the brave nine learnt to literally "body forth" their anger, frustration and defiance as well as their longing for freedom and fulfilment. Slowly, they developed their own intimate vocabulary, a concrete language of resistance, transforming their bodies into live chronicles of a long history of suppression and rebellion and building clusters of vivid, graphic images of great power and pathos. But the really remarkable thing about this show was it ruthless honesty; however much it hoped to empower women and raise their hopes it made no concessions to facile optimism.

It starts with the recorded voices of the nine women softly whispering their real names over and over then gathering force in a rising crescendo until the recumbent bodies begin to respond and rise. When they do, their bodies form a tangled, amorphous mass of twisted limbs, heads and torsos which struggle to extricate themselves from each other and establish their individual integrity. When this is done, they face us in three rows, looking deeply and earnestly (questioningly? Reproachfully?) into our eyes. That long, fixed gaze seemed to pour into our souls and had a staggering effect. The suffering of centuries seemed concentrated there. Next they mechanically recite a string of familiar clichés used to censure, admonish, caution, edify or chastise women, drilling them in their traditional roles. Then, in a rising physical crescendo this time, they begin to dust their clothes and rub off invisible dirt and stains from their hands, faces, hair and clothes. The activity reaches a frantic pitch and in desperation, having failed to remove the eternal stigmas that have attached to them throughout

history, they begin to mime ripping off their bodies in parts and hurling them at us — legs, arms, eyes, hips and all.

The following sequence is a mock striptease in which they violently divest themselves of one garment to reveal another underneath which they proceed to peel off until we reach the last. Nora of course would have loved to get rid of that as well, but this is as far as she could safely go in our society. I remembered how she used the same trick to suggest and simulate nudity in an earlier production. In *The Box of Our Live* she had taken off her black dress and stood in a skin-tight, flesh-colour leotard scribbled all over with words in black letters. It was her theatrical image for all the taboos historically inscribed on women's bodies. Here, she left her performers in training suits or trousers and T-shirts and instead of writing the history of oppression on their bodies she let them spell it out in movement all over the stage in big, bold letters.

*Nine* unfolded as a series of concise, highly charged and cunningly choreographed images, alternately involving the whole group or part of it, in which case the rest of the performers sat at the far end of the stage with their backs to us. In one sequence they all stand quite still while some invisible weight seems to be bearing down on them from above, trying to force them to their knees. You could feel the enormity of that weight and their desperate resistance in the tension of the muscles, the strained features, the look of desperate determination, the slight, almost imperceptible quivering of the legs or shoulders as if a taut string were about to snap. This silent, heroic resistance, which lasts for a few minutes, becomes poignantly moving as one by one the bodies slowly give way and begin to collapse. In another, equally unforgettable

sequence three performers — one lying flat on the floor, shaking convulsively, another on her side in an embryo position and the third crouching — struggle to stand up and keep their balance on the stage which their subsequent different movement patterns transform figuratively and synchronically into a stormy sea in one area, a quagmire in another, and a land in the grip of a violent earthquake in a third. The conception, execution and rhythmic orchestration of this scene — with one body rolling, swirling and tossed around and upside down at the back, another staggering, stumbling and slithering all over, and the third stuck in the middle, being pulled down while striving to resist and extricate itself, was ingenious and shattering in its effect.

But *Nine* was not all about the language of pain. There were moments of joy when the nine young women romped about, danced and shouted out their dreams and hopes before joining in a choral hymn to freedom. In this scene, the choral part gives way to a solo during which the singer, lying horizontally, is lifted up high by the others and then slowly lowered and folded round with their bodies, as if by rose petals, so that only her head shows in the centre of the formation which vividly suggests a rose. But the joyful moments are few and, like the rose, short-lived. Freedom is still far away and the road to it is strewn with martyrs. In the final scene, when the women collapse under the invisible weight, they manage to rise to their feet briefly, one final time, to hum the tune of Sayed Darwish's famous song *Biladi, Biladi, Laki Hobbi wa Fu'adi* (My country, Oh, my country, you have my love and my heart). The song was composed during the 1919 nationwide popular uprising against the British occupation. Women, though still veiled, were actively involved in that event and some were shot and killed. That tune, hummed just before the women lie down like corpses

lined up in a cemetery, was a sardonic reminder of the cruel fact that in political and ideological struggles down history women have been encouraged to sacrifice their lives for the cause in order to justify their claims to freedom and equality only to find that when the battle is won the booty is shared out solely among the men, all promises forgotten.

**Sameh Mahran**

***The Fist***

(est. 1999)

# Khafyet Qamar*

In Sameh Mahran's dramatisation of Mohamed Nagui's novel, *Khafyet Qamar* (a complex title with a play on words which refers to a real place where a woman called Qamar disappeared, a cursed spot where a female demon waylays men and snatches them underground, and an eclipse of the moon), the patriarchal system, with all its religious, economic and sexual assumptions, is exposed and subjected to a thorough, ruthless critique. This is not new to Mahran's work. In his previous plays and adaptations of novels for the stage (Yehya El-Taher Abdullah's *The Necklace and the Bracelet* and Abdel-Hakim Qasim's *The Seven Days of Man*), he shows a strong, almost obsessive pre-occupation with tracing the socio-economic organisations and mytho-historical contexts that generate the cultural and moral categories of gender and govern social behaviour, mental attitudes and value systems. To Nagui's convoluted myth (narrated in different versions by a deranged alcoholic to his drunken pub mates in the brief periods he manages to escape from his mental hospital) — a myth which centres on the genealogy of the narrator, the reality of the reported adultery of his mother, and the crazy claim of his sick father that he was the one who bore and gave birth to him — Mahran adds in corroboration the Greek myth of Zeus who swallowed his wife Metis to gain her power of reproduction.

I do not know if the play made any sense to those who had not read the novel. But judging by the response of the audience the night I saw

* 19 March 1998.

it, it definitely provided a satisfying, visually innovative, often very funny theatrical experience. It meant that in his first venture as director, and though working mostly with amateurs, Mahran had passed the test and got his credentials. It also meant that Hoda Wasfi was right when she decided to take the risk and spend money to give him his chance.

## Play it Safe*

Censorship, in a variety of guises, has always haunted the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre. One year, a Venezuelan modern dance show was nearly banned on account of the dancers' flimsy costumes. A private showing to a reviewing committee at the small hall of the Opera house ended in a compromise : the dancers agreed to wear tights underneath. An earlier and more flagrant instance was the cancelling of the second scheduled performance of a Norwegian version of *Hiroshima mon amour* on account of nudity. The nudity was actually confined to a single, fleeting frontal view of a naked female body; but that momentary glimpse was enough to axe the show.

In subsequent years, the festival guarded against such unwelcome surprises; videotapes of the guest productions were requested in advance and carefully scrutinized and vetted for any signs of nudity, homosexuality, or profanity. Tights became obligatory and physical contact between performers was viewed with deep suspicion, leading the Egyptian member of the international jury one year to staunchly resist and block an award to a foreign performance featuring two male prisoners in a work camp.

Egyptian shows are even more grimly censored. Mansour Mohamed's *The Game* which opened the festival one year is a case in point. Behind the back of the Egyptian selection committee, he had sneaked into the performance a new scene in which a belly dancer tops

* 27 August 1998.

a structure one side of which resembles *Al-Ka'ba* (the Islamic holy shrine in Mecca) and the other an oil barrel. The consequences of this innocent escapade (intended as a dig against religious hypocrisy, not against Islam) were tragic for him : his show was banned, he was stopped from work, ferociously hounded by the press and the majority of critics and accused of blasphemy. His heart gave in under the strain and he died six months later at the age of thirty-two. A year later, Intisar Abdul Fattah almost met with a similar fate when his *Book of Exiles* was misinterpreted by some as Zionist propaganda. As if Jews were the only exiles in the world ! And in 1997, another young director, Hani Ghanem, came close to disaster over a scene in his show, *A Journey*, featuring two nude males rolling in mud and completely covered with it. He was ordered to provide them with linen underwear, and despite his compliance, the show was widely considered outrageous and drew some really vicious abuse on moral grounds.

Year after year, one keeps hoping that the festival will rid itself of the scourge of censorship which blots its reputation and damages its credibility. Last week, however, I was given fresh proof that censorship is as active as ever. After weeks of vexatious shilly-shallying, the public censor's office issued its verdict on Samih Mahran's *The Boatman* which has been in rehearsal for two months at Al-Salam theatre; a truncated and bowdlerized version of the play will be allowed two performances only during the festival and banned afterwards in the interest of public morality.

The play, originally commissioned by the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Centre during a visit by the author to the USA last year, centres on the metaphor of drowning and fuses the themes of sexual frustration and

moral, political and social oppression. It boldly uncovers and ruthlessly anatomizes the plight of millions of young people in Egypt today who are condemned by the combined forces of moral taboos and economic circumstances to eternal celibacy. After an eight-year romance, a young couple, desperate for a private place, take a boat on the Nile after bribing the policeman on patrol. But the trip ends in tragedy with the woman's drowning and her lover's complete moral disintegration. The agent of tragedy is the boatman of the title (the policeman's brother) – a sinister, hermaphroditic figure who claims, in the name of justice, the right to sleep with both of them in turn.

In a letter to the author, American critic and actress Holly Hill, who served on the CIFET international jury last year (1997), described the play as both "delightful and poignant ... a work of art because, even in translation, the language has beauty and the play a metaphoric structure in the use of water." In another place she calls it "a romantic farce, bearing in mind that farce is on the edge of tragedy." Both in Arabic and in Dina Amin's English translation, *The Boatman* comes across as pungently ironical and vigorously funny. Most of the wit and humour derive from the couple's painfully futile attempts to suppress their sexual drives by rehearsing every possible argument in favour of chastity, abstinence and spiritual love. The arguments often clash, revealing the moral and ideological confusion of the couple, while the frequent eruption of earthy language into the absurdly highfalutin intellectual dialogue monitors their mounting sexual desire.

In the version to be seen at the festival, much of this plain earthy language will disappear : it was deemed too offensive and obscene. Another bone of contention was the bi-sexual identity of the boatman

and Mahran had to fight very hard to save it even at the cost of having the play performed only twice. "There wouldn't be a play otherwise," he bitterly says. In one of the gruelling sessions he underwent at the censor's office, he was told by one female assistant that she found the boatman's desire to have sex with a man "abnormal, loathsome and disgusting." In vain he tried to explain to her the mythological dimension of the character and the symbolic meaning of its behaviour. At the end of his tether, he suddenly asked her why she did not find the projected rape of the woman objectionable. "That was *natural* sex at least," she smugly replied. When he finally gave up and walked out declaring that he would change nothing and that they might as well ban the play, he was punished with this hypocritically ambivalent verdict – a silly, costly ruse that fools no body and can only serve to further isolate the festival from the general public and consign it to a marginal place in the life of society, reducing it, like the old carnivals of the past, to a frivolous, escapist, self-indulgent seasonal activity, tolerated because it helps to stave off change and entrench the status quo.

*The Boatman*'s two performances will prove the most expensive ever in the history of the Egyptian state-theatre – both in terms of money and human effort. A production budget that runs into several tens of thousands of pounds (paid out of the tax-payer's money) and months of painstaking planning and hard work will be sacrificed to maintain the illusion that censorship does not meddle with the festival. The pundits at the censor's office had not of course bargained for this; they had naturally hoped that dawdling over giving a clear yes or no would automatically discourage the actors and disrupt the rehearsals and production process – which actually happened : rehearsals stopped, the actors melted away, the director found himself another play to present at

the festival then went off to Italy while work on the sets and costumes has not started yet.

But the censorial contingent could not dawdle forever. One of the laws governing the work of the censor's office clearly stipulates that applicants should be notified of the censor's decision within a month of submitting the text; otherwise, they could go ahead with the work and present it publicly after filing a legal complaint. In controversial cases, such as *The Boatman*, when the author refuses to cooperate by removing the offensive bits and where a straightforward ban could embarrass the ministry of culture which organizes the festival, decisions are usually withheld until a couple of days before the end of the legally specified deadline, then the applicant is sent a short official note curtly stating that his or her work is still under consideration. This puts the censor off the hook, allowing him to play for time and put off the danger of legal action for a while. Unhappily for Mahran, the producer of *The Boatman* is the state-theatre organization which is notoriously reluctant to fall foul of censors. He got precious little help from that quarter and has completely lost faith in it. Nevertheless, he is determined to put the show together in time for the festival "to vex the censor, if nothing else," as he says.

The case of *The Boatman* cuts clean across all the attractive slogans that surround the CIFET and discredits them. Taboos are ultimately enforced and freedom of thought and expression is severely restrained. And until such time as the festival squarely addresses the issue of censorship and honestly grapples with it, the title "experimental" will remain spuriously ornamental, limited to safe formalistic gimmickry.

# Di and Doody Meet Shakesy*

After the Clinton / Monica affair which triggered two farces, it was inevitable that someone should want to cash in on the Diana / Doody scandal, their shocking, untimely death and the sensational conspiracy theory it sent flying around. But unlike the authors of *The Blue Dress* and *My Wife, Monica and I*, playwright Sameh Mahran made no bones about putting the protagonists of the real story on stage and making them enact his own lurid and somewhat whimsical version of it.

Obviously, as *Dooditello* amply demonstrates, Mahran harbrours no sympathy for either the princess or her paramour and does not believe for a moment that what brought them together was anything other than mutual self-interest. Diana, played by the fair and luscious Rehab El-Shabrawi, is portrayed as a vain, scheming, vengeful woman out to get her own back on Charles and the royal family, while Tarek Abdul Fattah as Emad El-Fayed seems no more than a spoilt, spineless milksop who does nothing but drool over her physical charms all the time while she coquettishly but firmly puts him off. It is for Queen Elizabeth and the Arabs, however, that Mahran saves his most savage wit and ruthless lampooning.

Adopting the conspiracy theory as a structural framework, the play opens with Queen Elizabeth I, impersonated by a man (Hamada Shousha) in drag, ranting and raving at the mortifying prospect of her daughter-in-law marrying an 'Arab' and dragging down the royal

* 26 April 2001.

family into the mud. She would stop at nothing to prevent that marriage and in her racist frenzy hits upon the fantastical idea of summoning up Shakespeare from the dead by means of cloning to dispose of the errant couple as he formerly did with Othello and Desdemona. She dwells gloatingly on the final scene of *Othello*, referring to the play as "that delicious piece of virulent racism". In this and subsequent scenes, Elizabeth I behaves more like a fishwife than a queen and is consistently coarse, vulgar and obscene; and the fact that she was played by a man, not bound by the conventional rules of modesty actresses are forced to observe to some degree, made the figure all the more bawdy and utterly grotesque. Hamada Shousha who has a natural flair for transvestite roles played the part with abandon and obvious relish, forming with Kamal Atteyah (as the lord chamberlain) a zany, zingy duo.

The second scene moves from the British court to some unspecified spot in the Arab world where a trio of bearded, galabiyya-clad bufoons (members of a secret Jihad orginazation, it transpires) form, with the help of a headless dummy horse, a tableau vivant representing a knight on horseback with his lance poised over a prostrate figure, ready to stab. But this emblamatic image of heroism is marred by one detail : the head and front part of the horse are human, supplied by one of the threasome. Apart from its comic effect, the distortion vividly evokes the Centaurs of Greek mythology and, in the context of the play which openly posits that "east is east and west is west and ne'er the twain shall meet" (as one of the Arabs asserts, quoting Rudyard Kipling verbatim), may remind the more knowledgeable among the audience of the fierce fight between the Centaurs and the Lapithae which later became the subject of some of the metopes of the Parthenon where it symbolized

the conflict between the Greeks and Persians. Such a reading may seem too belaboured and far-fetched, but it is not wildly implausible. Mahran is no run-of-the-mill writer; he is exceptionally widely read, particularly in literature, history and mythology, a member of academia with a B.A. in Hebrew, a Ph.D. in drama and a fair amount of published research. Moreover, his previous writing shows a marked predilection for intricate allusions and elaborate metaphors. One can, therefore, safely assume that he deliberately planted the figure of the Centaur in this scene as an erudite visual metaphor to suggest a parallel in the past for the east / west conflict he depicts in the present.

The trio's clownish horseplay is interrupted by the arrival of their leader, a hissing, shulking figure, masquerading as a street-sweeper and armed with a broomstick. He tells them that the people at the top have changed their minds about Doody and his prospective deed; rather than a traitor who has betrayed the Arabs by wanting to marry a princess of the nation which formerly colonized their countries, he is now viewed as a hero who will avenge the Arabs' past wrongs by conquering a member of that nation's royal family, physically colonizing her and bringing her under the iron rod of conjugal authority. Here, sex is implicity defined as an act of violence, a form of aggression and subjugation and, indeed, the abuse of sex in both the east and the west is a major theme that runs through the whole play, often surfacing in the verbal dialogue in ribald puns and salacious innuendoes.

The leader who apes the manners and bigoted discourse of fanatics and petty-minded religious fundamentalists (acted by Khaled El-Kharbotli with overwhelming energy and exuberance) becomes the

focus of the scene and the butt of Mahran's most savage satire. Pressed for a plot to get the queen out of Doody's way, he seeks inspiration in *The Arabian Nights* and finds the ideal solution in the story of the man who once, while eating dates and throwing away the stones, inadvertently hit the son of a giant jinnee, killing him on the spot, whereupon the bereaved father instantly killed him in return. Believing that the legendary jinnee is still around and functional (and why not since, as he instructs his disciples, the past lives on, quite unchanged, in the present), he decides to present the queen with a gift of the choicest dates of Arabia. Sooner or later, he hopes, she is bound to knock off some baby jinnee with a stone, and the rest can be trusted to his irate parent.

The next scene shows us Diana and her lover in a forest of photographers disguised as trees. The couple know they are there but do not let on and pose for them while pretending to act spontaneously. The two characters and their relationship are quickly delineated with a few bold strokes, unambiguously defined and firmly fixed. Neither they or any of the other characters undergo any change and, indeed, one does not expect it in a farcical satire.

Scene four takes us back to Buckingham Palace (in this play, a bare stage with nothing but a modest, wide armchair on top of a platform with a few steps leading down, and three screens at the back on which coloured slides of Westminster, of Diana, of her and Doody in bathing suits, and of her funeral intermittently flash). There, the newly genetically-engineered Shakespeare, or Shakesy, as the queen nicknames him (acted with zest and gustro by Sherif Subhi), arrives fresh from the lab. Physically, he seems all right from the head to the

waist; but from the waist down, he is badly deformed. The scientist who cloned him (Mohamed Haseeb), himself far from normal and palpably the victim of some grievous disorder of the nervous system, explains the reason : halfway through the operation, the funds set aside for it ran out. But Shakesy is not only physically deformed, but also a brainless, bleating imbecile who would only feed on fodder.

Interesting or funny as this travesty of the bard may be, it failed to attach itself to the play in any significant or functional way and remained till the end a redundant, dispensable adjunct. One can of course stretch a point and argue that its very ineffectualness is meaningful in that it exposes the impotence and bankruptcy of modern science and technology and of the modern civilization which has put all its faith solely in them. This would implicitly assume that the play juxtaposes the past and the present, siding with the former against the latter. Such a juxtaposition is indeed suggested by the bigoted Arabs who live the past in the present and are loath to change and the queen's insistence on rushing the present into the future. But since both attitudes are represented by negative characters and are, therefore, equally ridiculed and dismissed, and since Mahran fails to present a positive alternative, a third way, a single sympathetic character, or one which is more than simply a grotesque caricature, the interpretation I have volunteered remains extraneous to the play. It is possible that Mahran had it in mind when he decided to introduce the cloned Shakesy and the *Othello* inter-racial marriage theme; but if so, he has failed to integrate it into his play as an active force in the dramatic plot or a vital element in the structure of meaning. And the fact that he himself directed this text forestalls the throwing of blame elsewhere. Both in the writing and staging, Mahran seems to have been carried away by the galloping spirit

of satire, and in its heady rush, it has managed to level everything in its way, sparing nothing and no one.

By the end of scene four, halfway through the play, one distinctly begins to feel in what follows that Mahran's inventiveness has run out of stream and that he is at a loss what to do with the delicious and explosively funny travesties he has created. He lets them ramble for another hour willy-nilly, abruptly changing course and taking different directions for no apparent reason except, perhaps, to have something to do. When the Arab trio arrive at the court with the gift of dates, their leader materializes out of the blue to give them orders to change their target and join forces with Elizabeth against Doody. Why? is anybody's guess. What does this twist lead to? Nothing. Their planned ganging up with the queen against Doody boils down to their being present at his performance of *Othello*, with Diana as Desdemona.

As for the leader, he keeps himself busy chasing after Shakesy in female disguise, insistently clamouring that he is the donor of the egg that caused this misshapen creature to come into the world and is, therefore, his mother. The reason is clear : the Arabs want to revive the myth that Shakespeare was in fact no Englishman but a North African Arab, like Othello, and to prove it true, they are willing to put up with his addle- brained, idiotic double. When things begin to drag, and nothing seems to be leading to a plausible, or even implausible end, the Lord Chamberlain takes matters in hand and prompts Shakesy to propose to the queen that Diana and Doody perform *Othello*. But just before the play-within-the-play, he suddenly turns informer against the queen (and don't ask me why) and warns them that she intends it as a kind of Hamletian mousetrap. In what way, is not explained or even hinted at.

The penultimate scene replays the murder of Desdemona in a farcical vein with many changes. When Shakesy objects, Di and Doody fall upon him on the bed and give him a good beating while the queen withdraws in disgust. The final scene is a startling shift from Othello to Hamlet and is a pungently satirical inverted version of Hamlet's encounter with his father's ghost. The ghost here is Doody's; how or when he died, the play blithely ignores. He steps out of what looks like a shop-window, bordered with coloured, lighted bulbs (one of Harrod's during Xmas, perhaps?). El-Fayed, senior, faces him, vowing to do whatever he orders, but Doody has only one thing on mind and two words which he keeps repeating : THE BRITISH NATIONALITY.

Mahran may have slipped up here and there in the text, particularly in the second part, but his staging of the play (in his second attempt as director) was consistetly lively, imaginative, well-orchestrated and nimble in pace and movement. With a modest budget, next to no sets and a predominantly young cast, many of whom lack experience and are non-professionals, he produced a work guaranteed to entertain all and provoke many. Its witty and reckless debunking of everything and poking fun at all, and its refreshingly bold risqué mood and humour are a healthy and much-needed antidote to the heavy-handed moralizing of many a play and the moral hypocrisy of others.

**Rasha El-Gammal's**

***The Guild***

(est. 2001)

# Method in their Doodles*

You have to be really very young and extremely optimistic to believe that such little "museum pieces" as Tawfik El-Hakim's *He Knew How to Die* or *The Song of Death*, presented at the Wallace theatre last week, could work on the Egyptian stage right now or relate, even distantly, to the Egyptian contemporary scene. The first, about a superannuated politician who plans a resounding death but drowns ignominiously in an open sewer, is little more than a joke, and not in very good taste at that. Whatever touch of political satire it may have once carried has long been eroded by successive tides of more vicious political corruption. Likewise, the vendetta theme which provides the centre of *The Song of Death* has currently lost its tragic edge in view of the more menacing and pressing issue of religious, sectarian feuds.

Director Ahmad El-Attar did his best with *He Knew*, but the text remained obstinately pallid and adamantly feeble. Ihab Shawqi's choice of *The Song* was slightly luckier, providing good acting parts for its four-member cast and a reasonable degree of mounting dramatic tension. But one could not help feeling that it should have been, somehow, updated and made relevant to the bloody tragedy taking place in Upper Egypt right now. It would then, perhaps, have gripped its audience better. As it was, the wonderful performances of Areeg Ibrahim as the vengeful mother and Khalid Abul Naga as her doomed son missed a vital chord, and the gap was filled with the faint, suppressed giggles of the audience whenever the "old, rusty knife" was

* 21 April 1994.

called for. Indeed, Mohamed Abdul Ghaffar, as cousin Himeida (who finally kills the renegade son who rejects the revenge cycle) could hardly keep a straight face at the mention of the fearsome weapon. Still, there was the elegant sparsity of the set to enjoy and some moments of real tension.

Compared to El-Hakim's stolidly literary and sullen pieces, Rasha El-Gammal's frothy "demons", who finished off the evening, were a delightful relief. Taking Abdul Hadi El-Gazzar's paintings as her starting point and fount of inspiration, she set about animating his magical world where the archetypal images of the collective folk unconscious are bodied forth in powerful, surrealistic formations. For a narrative framework, Miss El-Gammal wouldn't settle for anything less than an epic, panoramic view of the whole of human life projected in terms of the progress of a male and a female from infancy till death, and after. Fittingly, the last scene takes place on doomsday.

In the world of *Afareet Hamza wa Fateema (Hamza and Fateema's Afreets or Demons)*, cats have human bodies, faces split and acquire the craziest imaginable features, and the chorus wear a weird medley of masks. Here, elves and demons rub shoulders with humans, the incubus and the succubus are familiar figures, and the legendary knight Abul Siba' (the father of lions) is eternally present to curb and admonish the follies of ordinary mortals and set a heroic (albeit ridiculously inflated) ideal of conduct.

A spirit of childish self-indulgence, of innocent sensual daring and refreshing irreverence permeated the whole spectacle and manifested itself in naming the physical parts by their shockingly proper names. In Rasha El-Gammal's world, as in Abdul Gazzar's, there is no place for

the euphemisms of adult, polite society. Here, the invariably embarrassing honesty of kids is your only entrance permit. And what a small price it is to pay for admittance to this sumptuous audio-visual feast !

Miss El-Gammal, though still very young (born in 1971), has managed to capture something of the real spirit of Egypt, the Egypt of the Pharaonic, Meditteranean, Graeco-Roman civilization. Her pert and tongue-in-cheek rendering of the story of creation, and her hilarious version of the day of judgement are a wonderful tonic in those sadly humourless days.

Rasha, herself, played the lizzardly sinuous succubus, sneaking her way subtly and humourously into the imagination of the people on and off stage, while the baby-faced Nada Mubarak, lithe and blithe, scattered twinklings of the fading stars at dawn and spread Aurora's rosy mantle, as it shines on the silent greeness of the valley, on the small stage at the Wallace. Miss El-Gammal sent us away, at the end of this triple bill, with the gift of hope. And with her, and such wonderfully alive young people as Nada Mubarak (Dew-drops), Amr Wahid (the sinewy and unbreakable Hamza), Mu'taz Fathi's (the tolerant and easily accommodatable folk hero), and her bubbling chorus, who can dare lose hope ?!.

## Heaven and Earth : A Tentative Preview of the Hereafter*

Years ago, I read somewhere that an agnostic French thinker about to kick the bucket told his friends : "Je m'en vais chercher le grand peut-etre" (I'm on my way to look for the "Great Perhaps"). A short cut for him would have been watching Rasha El-Gammal's recent play, *Under the Tree* and, I dare say, it would have given him plenty of reassurance. Rather than Sartre's *néànt* or nothingness, Dante's *Limbo* or, indeed, the scary traditional view, widespread in Egypt since the rise of religious fundamentalism in the 1970s, which tells you that from the moment you give up the ghost till doomsday, you get no peace, spending the whole time in the cold grave being savagely tortured for your past sins by angels too vengeful to give you any reprieve or too impatient to wait for the day of judgement, the play projects the other world as a peaceful oriental garden where humans spend the time reflecting upon their former lives, exchanging experiences and achieving greater tolerance and wisdom.

Like Caryl Churchill's restaurant in the first act of *Top Girls* (which inspired director Effat Yehya and her Caravan troupe their *Desertscape* in the late 1990s) and Lisa Loomer's hospital in *The Waiting Room* (directed by Tori Haring-Smith for the AUC company around the same time), El-Gammal's garden is a timeless stage which brings together people from different ages and far-flung places. But humans are not the only inhabitants of the garden; side by side with

* 15 November 2001.

Hamza (Sa'id Mustafa), a poet at the Abbasid court in Baghdad, Safiyya (Inji El-Gammal), a an Andalusian courtezan from Granada, Om El-Hana (Sarah Nur El-Sherif), a thrice-married housewife from the Ottoman period, and Kamel (Karim Mansour), a mother-dominated young man from the Cairo of the 1920s, we find a mischievous, Puck-like spirit called Ilham (Inji El-Shabrawi), a soft, magical creature of infinite beauty (Dina Ayesh) who drops pearls instead of tears every time she weeps for humans, an inept Mr. Nizam (Yehya El-Diqin), a kind of metaphysical detective, who is supposed to keep a record of every thought, word and action both in heaven and on earth, and two talking songbirds (Zeinab Sa'id and Dina El-Fer'ouni) who assist him and act as news reporters.

Visually, the performance unfolds on two planes simultaneously : upstage, on a raised level, against a backdrop representing a garden scene, slightly adapted from a picture in *Aga'eb Al-Makhluqat wa Ghara'eb al-Mawgudat* (*Wonderous Creatures and Strange Beings*) – a 13th Century book by Zakareya El-Qazweeni (1208-1283), a judge and geographical historian, nicknamed the Herodotus of the middle ages and the Arabs' Pliny – we see the denizens of the garden, in their sumptuous, historical or fairylike costumes, mulling over the past, sifting through their memories, discussing human relationships, arguing and occasionally bickering. On one side, a step below, a sad, middle-aged man, in a humble suit, sits slumped, patiently waiting under a cardboard tree of the kind we find in children's illustrated story-books. The question whether he should be admitted to the garden or not triggers a review of his life on earth which takes the form of short, quick sketches, performed downstage, close to the audience, in

contemporary costumes, with minimal props, and in an openly theatrical manner reminiscent of a cartoon-strip.

The story of Mr. Abd El-Dayem (Mohamed Shahin), a stereotype of the conventional, harassed civil servant, with a fat, good-natured, ignorant wife (Nermeen Sa'id) and two marriageable daughters, is quite ordinary, even banal. As in folk tales, the two daughters, one strong and shrewd, the other naïve and confused, find rich suitors and settle down in comfortable, bourgeois homes. But, unlike in fairy stories, it is only the crafty one, Fayqa (Yara Atif) who lives happily ever after; the other, the artless, docile Ahlam (Nevin El-Ebiari), meets a violent death when her filthy-rich, psychopathic husband (Beshir Shousha), who imprisons her and treats her like a cherished doll while physically abusing her on a regular basis, hurls her down the stairs while pregnant. But why should Abd El-Dayem be blamed for that? Because, as the elder sister, Fayqa, tells him and us, he and his wife knew all along, or at least suspected, what was happening and deliberately shut their eyes because they coveted the husband's money and his influence. When Ahlam came to them for help and pleaded for protection because she feared for the baby's life, they trotted out the old, hackneyed cliches about a wife's duty and keeping the family together whatever the cost and sent her back to her death.

Conjugal and family relationships also figure prominently in the memories of the garden people and their individual stories. The two levels, however, heaven and earth, remain teasingly separate, moving parallel to each other without any real interaction. At best, the memories of the dead and their comments on the drama on earth they witness (but never judge) provide variations and points of comparison rather than

antithetical components that could point in the direction of some kind of new synthesis. The final message, if one may sum it up, seems that it takes all sorts to make a world and that poor, frail, erring humanity will keep on making the same mistakes over and over again. The only wise response is tolerance and forgiveness; but in this case, and since everyone – the sinner, Abd El-Dayem, as well as his sinned against daughter, Ahlam – are equally admitted to the garden, isn't tolerance carried to the point of complete moral indifference? The Persian tapestry at the back, however, points in a different ethical direction – towards philosophies which regard good and evil in a different light, as part of a larger, inscrutable design in which they are, in the words of Wordsworth, "rolled in earth's diurnal course with flowers, stones, and trees".

Judging by her previous works, the unforgettable *The Spirits* (or *Afreets) of Hamza and Fatma* (1995) in which the paintings of the late Abd El-Hadi El-Gazzar provided mood, theme, design and reference point, *The Merry Jungle* (1996) and *Baheya The Mute* (1998), Rasha El-Gammal, a trained and talented painter and set and costume designer, seems to be in her real element with legend, myth and folklore. She blithely combines them, together with her knowledge of Islamic art and architecture (she got an MA degree in that area from the University of London in 1996) to build her own original, humorous and stunningly colourful theatrical world. Whatever the topic, the thesis or message of the play (and they are usually inspired by Arab culture and Egyptian daily life), the spectator is sure to find exquisite costumes of the finest design and fabric (a rare treat in the contemporary Egyptian theatre), inspired, memorable sets, a childlike, refreshing view of the world and

an authentically Egyptian delight in difference, multiplicity and the variegated pageant of life. With more young artists like Rasha and her newly-founded Guild troupe (all AUC theatre graduates who seem to share her zest and imaginative rebelliousness), I would feel more hopeful of the future and less fearful of any small or great 'maybes'.

**The Angels Team**

**At the Abba Antonios Church**

**in Shubra**

(est. 1999)

# An Everyman from Shubra[*]

One rainy evening last February, I threaded my way gingerly through the many freshly formed pools and puddles that dotted the long and narrow Karji street in Shubra – one of the many side streets which branch off the main El-Tir'a El-Bulaqiyya thoroughfare. My destination was the Abba Antonios Coptic Church; and though it lies prominently opposite an important landmark in the area – the Kitchner hospital – and not very far from where I was born and grew up, it took me sometime to find it. The area, indeed, the whole of Shubra has changed considerably since the fifties; it still retains in the architecture of some of its fast disappearing old buildings faint traces of a graceful past; but generally, this once elegant and cosmopolitan district of Cairo now wears the look of a gentleman fallen on hard times.

Another reason why I got lost in the maze of small streets around the Abba Antonios is that it was not one of the churches I used to frequent as a girl with my Christian friends and school mates. My favourite had been Saint Teresa which lay conveniently across the road from my school, and which I often visited with my closest friend then, Nadia Shakir Takla (I wonder where she is now), before exams to bolster our chances of success with prayer, the blessing of a priest, and a sprinkling of holy water. In those good old days, it did not seem to matter where one prayed, so long as the prayer was genuine; but, sadly, that is something of the past.

* 22 July 1999.

The reason I went to the Abba Antonios that evening in the rain was neither prayer nor nostalgia. It was a theatrical mission, and one unlike any other. I have been known to chase after theatre in the most curious places (among the most interesting was the roof-top of a social services building in El-Sayyida Zeinab district); but that evening, I was going to watch a play sponsored by a church, and performed at its theatre, by its own theatre group; and not any play — not a heavy- handed, bludgeoning morality, or a run-of-the-mill religious piece about the life of some saint, nor a respectable classic of the kind occasionally performed in another church in Shubra (the Mari Morqus in El-Khalafawi area) for educational purposes — but, and here is the crux, a modern, thoroughly secular, rollicking Egyptian comedy. The entertainment of the evening was to be Lenin El-Ramly's *Inta Hurr* (literally, *You're Free*, and alternatively, *As You Like*, or *Have It Your Own Way*).

As far as I know, this is the first time an Egyptian church sponsors a production of a secular dramatic text from the mainstream theatre, and a comedy at that. And judging by the large attendance and warm reception of the show, it is a leading step in the direction of establishing district and community theatres and providing fresh and much needed spaces for the nourishment and airing of the rich theatrical talent of Egypt. Imagine how it would be like if all the churches up and down the country sponsored theatre artists ! We would have hundreds of local theatres and local stars offering a kind of home-grown theatrical entertainment that addresses local needs and interests, as well as larger human issues, and makes theatre a vital part of the daily life of the community rather than a commercial enterprise.

I thought dreamily of this as I sat in the Abba Antonios theatre, a large, wood-panelled hall, with small, high windows on one side and a stage at the far end, on the second floor of the church's community-service annexe. I had arrived there wet and cold, and also flustered, for I thought I was late. But the show had not begun. On stage, a choir of young men and women were giving a concert as part of the evening's entertainment, and their beautiful, well-trained voices and melodious hymns soon calmed my nerves. I do not know if the hall was heated; but I soon felt quite warm, even slightly hot, and may be the reason was the ebullient, festive mood inside the crowded auditorium. The audience, which represented all generations, and seemed to consist, in a large portion, of groups of friends, neighbours, and whole families, including children, grand parents, and relatives, was refreshingly free of the usual restraints and codes of decorum which govern the behaviour of the traditional, well-trained audience of main-stream theatres. They had come to enjoy themselves, not to listen to a sermon, and therefore didn't see why they couldn't get up when they wanted, walk about, make side-comments to friends, greet one another loudly from a distance, crunch crisps, sip soft drinks, or even smoke during the performance as well as the interval. It was an unruly audience, but wonderfully receptive, fervently enthusiastic, infectiously vivacious and high spirited. The relaxed, informal, convivial atmosphere in the auditorium gave zest to the performance, making it a genuinely festive communal event, and reminded me of what a Shakespearean or any Elizabethan audience must have been like.

The same audience, but multiplied tenfold, followed the play and its actors and artistic crew, The Angels Team, to Al-Hanager earlier this month for a one-night performance. There was a tremendous crush at

the door, more serious than anything you see during the Experimental Theatre Festival, and some people nearly got trampled underfoot; someone fainted, others screamed, and the security men of Al-Hanager had to be called. It seemed that the whole population of Shubra was there. I remembered sardonically the feverish pursuit of stars by the managers of the state-theatres in the hope of filling their dismally empty auditoriums, and how on many occasions I discovered that the number of the actors on stage during a performance at one of those theatres surpassed the number of spectators. The sheer size of the audience at Al-Hanager last Monday gives the lie to those officials who claim (for want of a better explanation for their failure) that Egyptians do not like to go to the theatre unless they can gaze at a star.

There were no stars in the Abba Antonios's production of El-Ramly's *You're Free* – only a good text, intelligently adapted by Midhat Phillip to suit the 1990s (it was first performed in 1981 by the Studio 80 company with Mohamed Subhi in the lead); good, dedicated actors, intent on giving their all and willing to rehearse for months; a talented and passionately committed director, Michel Maher; and a loyal artistic and management crew. With a modest budget (judging by Joseph Neseem's almost primitive sets and minimal props), The Angels Team produced a sparkling example of popular theatre and a ground-breaking work in the field of church theatre. Formed in 1995, the Team, which includes members from different churches as well as a number of Muslims, has looked upon theatre not as a hobby, a pleasurable indulgence, a self-fulfilling activity, or simply fun, but as part of worship and a service to the community. This, however, has not made them sullenly serious, sternly solemn, or glumly earnest. Their work evidences an abundant sense of humour, a pronounced quizzical

streak, and a predilection for popular comedy, farce, and even slapstick. Unfortunately, I have not seen any of their previous productions which include many children's shows (I know of nine performed between 1995 and 1997) as well as two new plays – *Claquette, 2nd Time*, written and directed by Michel Maher (1996), and *I'm Calling You*, by Kirollos Abdallah, also directed by Maher (1997). But regardless of their quality, they have undoubtedly helped the team to discover their potential, develop their skills, try out styles of acting, and evolve that serio-comic approach to life which views it as a tragic farce, bubbling with zany humour and sunny laughter on the surface, but very dark and lonely underneath. In this respect, the choice of *You're Free*, and the adaptation it has been subjected to are very telling.

The prototype of El-Ramly's hero, significantly called 'Abdou' to denote (liked the hero/victim of Salah Abdel Saboor's earlier verse drama *Night Traveller*) all Egyptians, is the Everyman of the eponymous medieval English morality play; and, indeed, in its total design which traces the earthly destiny of Abdou from birth to death, and exposes his ceaseless search for freedom – through love, physical strength, knowledge, religious faith, and money in turn – as a fruitless quest, *You're Free* is fundamentally a modern morality with political overtones and a forced socialist message. At the end, we are openly and directly told that individual salvation, i.e. freedom, is conditional upon the liberation of all the oppressed of the earth in a kind of universal franchise. In his introduction to the published text (1982), the author admits his deep dissatisfaction with the play in its present form, and I think that the main reason for this, and the one that explains its rambling length, many false climaxes, and embarrassing hectoring of

the audience at the end, is El-Ramly's attempt to pass off what is essentially a modern, existentialist morality and a tragic farce as a pungent political satire. Half way through, the play changes course and sympathies, and poor Abdou is forced to wear a political hat that sits uneasily on his head.

In his adaptation and updating of the text, Midhat Phillip intelligently side-stepped this pitfall and rid the play of many redundant scenes, topical references, and political allusions. He also excised the banal didactic finale, ending the play, as El-Ramly should have done, with Abdou's total disillusionment, arid despair, and lonely death. In this way, Abdou became a convincing modern everyman, grappling, albeit comically, with real problems and frustrations that we all know and recognize in our different stages of life. Some of his suffering was unnecessary and society-inflicted; but a residue of it was ineluctable, and part of the human condition. As Abdou/Everyman, Rami Adel played his part with verve and conviction, and the rest of the cast gave impressive performances, some of which far surpass a lot of what we see in the professional theatre. I intend to keep track of the Angels Team from now on, and am already looking forward to their next production. I advise you to do likewise. There is also a theatre festival for all the Shubra churches in August. I'll keep you posted on that.

# PART III

## Independent Solo Artists

***Working Through Al-Hanager Cultural Centre***

***and Other Venues***

# Mahmoud Niseem :

## A Room of One's Own*

I do not think I am singular in my obsessive fascination with doors and windows. As a young schoolgirl, sweating over her books during exams late into the night, I used to step out onto the long, crescent-shaped balcony which connected my bedroom to the living room in our fifth floor apartment, not for a breath of fresh air or to count the stars, but to draw comfort from the few friendly windows that still remained lighted. I made up all sorts of stories about the people there – simple, silly stories. I could not see them except as shadows, or momentary silhouettes flitting across the friendly squares of light in the distance across the wide street. Darkened windows, shuttered or gaping open, filled me with dread – like tombs and dark caves. Years later, I came across a passage by Virginia Woolf (in her *Mrs. Dalloway*, I think) which described with poetic intensity the impact of lighted windows on the heroine; it was like an epiphany : I finally understood the meaning of those vague, undefinable childhood feelings.

From Woolf's windows I went on to her *A Room of One's Own* and it captured my imagination long before it became a classic of the feminist movement. (By the way, the book has been finally translated into Arabic by Sumayya Ramadan and published by the Supreme Council for Culture, 1999). For some time afterwards I thought of rooms, somewhat romantically, as private spaces confined by walls for protection, seclusion, the freedom to be yourself and do your own

* 20 July 2000.

thing. But then Harold Pinter arrived on the theatrical scene with his dramatic debut, *The Room* (1857), and that romantic image began to crack, revealing not only the flimsiness of the security a room can provide ("A door can open at any moment and someone will come in", as Pinter said in an interview with John Sherwood), but also its grim potential as prison.

In his recent verse drama (his second dramatic venture after *Deer Pasture*), *The Room* (a study in the disintegration of the mind of a former leftwing revolutionary under the combined pressure of betrayal, political terror, and disillusionment with the cause), Egyptian poet Mahmoud Niseem – a prominent member of the 1970's Poets Movement – uses the double identity of the room, as both refuge and cell, as a structural matrix. Instrumental in defining this duality and formulating it as an existential experience is the division between "inside" and "outside"; the within and the without, which becomes more than just a topological distinction. Initially, the only connection (or separation) between the two spaces is a high window with a broken pane. Asked by Maged Omran, the owner of the room, what the world looks like outside the window, his former comrade, Ismael, describes it, almost echoing Pinter, as inexplicable, confusing, frightening, chaotic, peopled with demons and phantoms. Maged's room however, we soon discover, is not very different from the outside. Though it seems safe and sheltered, an impregnable asylum with not a single door in sight, it, too, is infested with demons and phantoms.

As the phantoms of the past (who, we discover as the lights go up, have been there all the time, lurking in corners, in the shadows, or behind a curtain) invade the room one by one, flooding it with

memories and crowding it with other spaces, the barriers between inside and outside crumble; they merge into one another and are figuratively transformed into an internal mental space – the landscape of a tortured mind.

The journey through this dismal internal landscape is conducted in the spirit of honest questioning and exploration of the reasons behind the frustrations, failures and defeat of the author's and his characters' generation of rebellious intellectuals and dreamers. The reasons can be summed up in one word : betrayal — on every possible level. And though Niseem shows a lot of sympathy towards his vanquished, broken characters, he manages to steer clear of sentimentality and facile explanations. I only wish he had shown a similar degree of self-control and artistic discipline in his management of language. He often got carried away on the wings of poetry, saying far more than was necessary so that, at times, the verse became a burden, threatening to sink the fine conception of the play. The text could have been sharper, more moving and, indeed, more eloquent with fewer words and some Pinteresque pauses. Still, like his earlier play, it is a very promising work, and in time I hope Niseem will learn the virtue of verbal economy and manage to sneak from under the heavy mantle which the late poet and dramatist Salah Abdul Saboor seems to have cast upon all writers of verse drama till this very day.

Perhaps director Abdul Sattar El-Khodary, who has more experience of what works and does not work in the theatre, should have worked with the author on the text to trim it a bit. Instead of that (and as if we did not already have enough words), he added a prologue consisting of a collage of bits and pieces of poems from the seventies,

saying more or less what the play eventually says at great length. His choice of cast, set and music, however, was both sensitive and intelligent. The acting was at once passionate and carefully disciplined. No excess there. The same cannot be said exactly of the set which was a little too cluttered for my taste. It seemed as if stage-designer, Ibrahim El-Fawi, did not trust the audience to grasp the meaning of what was being said, and so decided to provide them with lots of visual equivalents. In his quasi-naturalistic, quasi-expressionistic set, the most irritatingly naive element was a bed with its underside compartment in the shape of an incubator containing a man-size, reddish, premature baby. I guess the reason for adding this gruesome detail was a reference in the play to a book called *The Premature* by Arwa Saleh who committed suicide a few years ago by jumping out of a window after venting her wrath on the seventies' intellectuals. The most effective elements in the set were the window at the back and the black iron door with the small barred window which filled the proscenium arch at the beginning and end of the show. Hisham El-Mileegi's atmospheric music was suggestive and fittingly eerie, enhancing the sense of mystery, terror, and suspense and the lighting plan was sensitively thought out. What this show really needs, I thought as I left the theatre, is a lot of pruning and then, perhaps, verse drama can flower again.

# Abdel Fattah El-Beltagi :

## Utopia Upside Down*

Imagine an island where life is almost a continuous ball and no one has to toil; a place without doctors, hospitals or undertakers because the natives never age or get sick and death has become a dim memory of a distant past. Add to the picture the fact that women enjoy equal rights with men, prisons are merely decorative, with no jailers, locks or keys, and all dealings, of whatever kind, including bribery, adultery and nepotism, are open and above-board, never frowned upon but placidly regarded as part of the natural order of things, and you get the skewed image of paradise satirically conceived and hilariously projected at Al-Hanager every night to the delight of capacity audiences.

In his debut as playwright, Abdel Fattah El-Beltagi has produced a spirited and witty satire of the current mores and morals of contemporary Egyptian society. The shadow of *Gulliver's Travels* lurks in the background, and *Gezirat Al-Qur'* displays a similar imaginative energy and power of invention; but it has nothing of the stinging malice of Swift's barbed quips, or the disturbing and occasionally repelling darkness of his vision. El-Beltagi's bald islanders (hence the title *Island of the Bald*) may resemble Swift's Yahoos (in the second part of *Gulliver*) : they are to all intents and purposes beasts in human shape. The cosmic catastrophe which hit their island thousands of years ago has endowed them with immortality and cut them off from the march of time and the process of ageing; but it has also caused their

* 5 November 1998.

hair to fall, their skin to thicken, their normal temperature to drop to zero and their blood to cool, clot, and curdle. With their hair they lost all feelings (the word "shu'our" means both in Arabic) and have become impervious to pain, the heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to : A consummation devoutly to be wished by many of us, but not by the young doctor who literally drops down on the island from the sky before his plane crashes into the sea. To him, they seem a grotesque and monstrous mockery of humanity; but to the author, they are not beyond redemption, and you can never imagine him describing them, as Swift did his natives through the King of Brobdingang, as "the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth".

El-Beltagi's satire, though piercing and perspicacious, is never savage, raging, or repulsive. The sketches, drawn with sharp precision and meticulous economy, have a sort of raw immediacy and the references are bang up to date; and yet, there is something charmingly old-fashioned about their benign brand of humour and good-natured laughter. Indeed, the play has something of the unmistakable flavour of the fairy tale and of such adventure folk narratives as *Sinbad the Sailor*. The cruelty of the islanders towards the stranger, which takes the form of dipping their fingers in his open wounds, plucking hair off his body and head, or pricking him with pins and needles to watch his blood flow, is prompted by sheer curiosity, not by a vicious desire to torture him. They find hair and liquid blood curious and fascinating phenomena and in exploring them, they display the avid and zestful fascination of children with the intriguingly unfamiliar. Their sense of wonder is genuine enough and, therefore, quite moving. But equally so, and more disturbing, is the sense of menace. It springs not from

anything the characters say or do; in fact, the play is punctuated at regular intervals with disarmingly honest statements of powerlessness and ineptitude pronounced by the self-confessed ineffectual ruler. As they pile up, they become shatteringly funny and their absurdity reaches a climax when the ruler refuses to lead the search for the stranger who has eloped with his daughter, preferring to hide himself and let the errant couple go through the trouble of finding him.

The sense of menace is generated by the technique of consistently translating verbal metaphors, used in daily speech to describe and condemn indifference, dullness, apathy, insensitivity, lethargy and arrogant, transparent lying, into literal, concrete manifestations. As metaphors cross over from the world of language into the world of fact, reality becomes disturbingly grotesque. Another device lavishly and skillfully used by El-Beltagi is punning, and the most complex and intricate pun of all is the title of the play. The word *Qur'* which literally means bald, that is without hair (Sha'r or Shu'oor, in the plural), or without feeling (also Shu'oor), can be also pronounced *Qar'* (pumpkin or vegetable marrow), which in Egyptian slang means any deceitful talk or action that everybody sees through. Politicians are notorious for this kind of *Qar'*, Egyptians would tell you, and for the islanders of the play it is the staple diet. Indeed, not only do their heads look like pumpkins, but their pyramids too have acquired the shape of a watermelon.

In directing this deliciously fizzy and occasionally pungent satirical romp, Rami Imam (the son of star comedian Adel Imam) matched the author's wit and sophistication, displaying a sureness and lightness of touch and an impeccable sense of rhythm strange in someone making his debut as theatre director. His casting was perfect and he controlled

his actors (all of them amateurs and most of them making their first stage appearance) with a firm hand and orchestrated their performances with immaculate precision and scrupulous economy. In this kind of play, which bubbles over with humour, actors can get easily carried away and the temptation to ad-lib or do that little bit extra is almost irresistible. Surprisingly, after three weeks in performance, *Gezirat Al-Qur'* is still blissfully free of any cloying additions or stodgy intrusions. It is as light and effervescent as when it first opened, and the actors (who, except for the girls, have their heads regularly shaved) show the same unflagging zest, spirited commitment and strict discipline.

It is a credit to Rami Imam and his young actors (some of them with fathers as famous as his own) that they strictly refused to make use of their parents' influence, opting for Al-Hanager (that wonderful nursery of new talent) and a small budget when they could have easily had a fatter one and a larger venue. It is also a credit to Rami that he chose for his debut as director a play by a virtually unknown author, presenting to the Egyptian theatre a rich, new dramatic talent, and introduced through it a new crop of superb actors and gifted comedians who have the discipline and willingness to work as an ensemble and put the integrity of the show above everything else. Khaled Sarhan — who gave a stunning performance as the ruler of the island — could have, by dint of his charismatic presence, virtuosity, and the size of his part, upstaged everybody and stolen the show. Instead, he sedulously avoided any competitive jostling and diligently assisted his fellow actors to bring out their best and execute their comic turns with faultless timing. The same spirit informed the performances of Tamer Abdel-Mon'im as the stranger and romantic lover, of Wafaa El-Fakharani as

the ruler's consort and sole painter of the island, of Ahmed Shams as the man with a single hair left, of Mohamed El-Isawi as the undertaker out of a job, and of Eman El-Baraa as the island's seductive dancer. Equally promising and impressive were the performances of Mohamed Salama, Isam Mustafa, Ahmed Abdel-Mon'im, Du'a Allam, Khalid Shibl, Mohamed El-Husseini, Tamer Nusair, Shayma' Sha'lan, Wisam El-Digwi, Imad Barakat, Midhat Attallah, and Mustafa Mahdi.

As usual, the technical staff of Al-Hanager and its manager and artistic-director, Huda Wasfi, gave the new artists generous assistance and caring support, proving once more that to start right is to start at Al-Hanager.

# Sayed Mohamed Ali :

## The Art of Dodging*

The word *El-Khalabees* (plural of *khalbous*) which gives the current show at Al-Hanager its name may sound thoroughly colloquial and suggest an ancient Egyptian line of descent. But authoritative dictionaries – like *Lisan Al-Arab* and *Al-Mu'jam Al-Waseet* – assure us that as a noun of the verb "khalbasa" (meaning to escape or fly away), is pedigree classical Arabic. The word is used by El-Gabarti in his history of Egypt, which covers the period from 1775 to 1821, to refer to troupes of itinerant entertainers, similar to *El-Mehabazeen* or *Mehabazateyah* (from the verb "tahbeez", of unknown origin since neither of the two dictionaries mentioned above list it), who are hired to perform on festive occasions, both private and public.

The difference between "*El-khalabees*" and "*El-mehabazeen*", according to folklore specialists, is that the former mix acting with singing in their shows while the latter combine it with acrobatic feats. This makes sense, since the noun *khalbous*, according to *Al-Waseet*, refers to a bird "smaller than a sparrow or a warbler and of the same colour". One, however, is tempted to think of the implications of the verb *Khalbasa* and assume that the name *khalabees* carried with it the stigma of social marginalization and always having to dodge the authorities and fly away. Indeed, in current colloquial usage, *khalbous*, as an epithet, is used to describe a crafty, slippery dodger, regardless of

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* 19 December 2002.

the quality of "his" voice. Curiously, it is never applied to women or used with a feminine declension; the reason, perhaps, is that acts which rated as *khalbasa*, whether in acting or real life, were restricted to the public sphere and, therefore, performed or committed solely by men.

In the course of his research into indigenous forms of popular entertainment and theatrical phenomena in Egypt, playwright Sayed Mohamed Ali (who by the way is the nephew of the famous writer and dramatist Yusef Idris) stumbled upon *El-khalabees* and was intrigued by descriptions of their performances. As an experiment, he decided to revive their art and enlisted the help of Abdel Rahman El-Shaf'i – a talented and seasoned theatre director who has dedicated his whole life to the folk performing arts, and a master craftsman with a wonderful knack for infusing his work, however complex and sophisticated, with a disarming feel of sponatneity and raw, even crude vitality.

For material, Ali scoured the countryside in the company of his twin brother, composer Shukry Mursi, in search of stories, tunes and lyrics. In Kafr El-Shurafa, a small village near the Mohamed Ali barrages, he found two old legends which captured his imagination. The first tells how once upon a time all the males in the village performed the Friday prayers on a Wednesday for some mysterious reason. Like that other famous story which tells how the population of the town of Zaqaziq upon hearing that the train was going to pass though their town for the first time decided to invite 'him' to lunch, the Kafr El-Shurafa legend is generally regarded by the locals as a bad, offensive joke and a slur on their reputation. By questioning the village elders, Ali discovered that the reason behind those untimely Friday

prayers long ago was to elude the tax collector by deluding him into thinking they had already paid.

The other legend Ali found tells of an old, long feud between the biggest two families in the village, triggered by a dispute over burial ground. Eventually, the two families ended up with more bodies than they could find enough land to bury them in. Out of this material, and the many lyrics and tunes he and his brother collected, Ali created a meta-theatrical text which features a troupe of *khalabees* entertaining the guests at the wedding of the son of a village ruler ("*Omdah*") with a string of comic sketches, interspersed with solo and choral songs and dances.

The scenes follow each other like music hall numbers and are linked by the three khalabees (the luscious and richly endowed Aida Fahmi, the tall and wiry Zein Nassar and the short and burly Sami Maghawri) with lots of costume-changing, done on stage, in full view of everybody, and plenty of improvisation and boisterous verbal exchanges with the audience who are encouraged to join in the singing and clap in tune with the live folk band and singers. The tenuous narrative line, which is supposed to link the two Kafr El-Shurafa stories, consists of a prophecy of the imminence of doomsday spread through the village – which explains the feverish rush to secure graves and the quarrels and hard bargaining over them. It becomes increasingly flimsier as it gets frequently interrupted by the objections of the gullible and officious Omdah's guard and head watchman (Magdi El-Seba'i) who often takes what is acted for real or, in his zeal to display his loyalty to his master, suspects the khalabees of making subversive political allusions and veiled ironical remarks directed at his boss.

Though the imaginary setting is always Kafr El-Shurafa, the attempt to merge the two original stories is limply pursued; they remain ultimately separate, with the scenes bouncing from one to the other in a seemingly haphazard manner. In the process, the temporal order becomes utterly jumbled with sudden leaps between the imaginary past and present of Kafr El-Shurafa on the one hand, and between those fictional times and real time – the actual present time of the performance – on the other.

This sloppy handling of the play's temporal order and messing up of linear narrative progression is deliberate and part of the experiment since, according to folklore expert Rushdi Saleh, folk narration usually disposes of plot in the modern realistic sense, i.e., as an orderly temporal progression of causally linked events, and is constituted by two alternating processes : accumulation and digression. Indeed, at one point, the khalabees themselves become confused by the constant leaping between the two stories, are at a loss how to end them, and curse their luck for having no author to consult or take to task.

In print, *El-Khalabees* would make little sense dramatically or as a logical narrative, and it isn't meant as either. Like any *commedia dell'arte*, it was written as a provisional script to be developed and filled in later by the director and actors. Which is what happened. Abdel Rahman El-Shaf'i told me that he worked on the script with Ali, removing over thirty pages, adding bits of dialogue here and there and a few scenes, arranging the musical interludes and creating calculated gaps for the actors to bring their imagination into play and force them to ad-lib on the spur of the moment. It was hard work, he confesses, much harder than working with a straightforward text. But it is what he

prefers to do and would opt for at any time. And it worked. The experiment has proved a roaring success, drawing big audiences even on evenings when important football matches were broadcast live on television.

Though the stage of Al-Hanager was free and available, El-Shaf'i decided to use the art gallery and pitch a tent there where the actors can be in close proximity with the audience and on the same level as them. Ideally, he would have liked to seat his audience around the performance space on all sides, as is the case in all the popular performances which come under the loose rubric of *Al-Samer Al-Sha'bi* – his primary source of inspiration as well as that of the author, the composer (Shukri Mursi), the set and costume designers (Ibrahim El-Fawi and Wisam Adel), and the actors and folk musicians and singers. But since the gallery is rectangular in shape, he had to give up this plan, and to make up for the loss of intimacy which the arena stage guarantees, he planted his *Omdah* — a ridiculous scarecrow bedecked with ribbons, medals and an enormous straw hat — and his guard among the audience and virtually annulled the space separating the actors from the first row. Sitting there, you could easily touch the actors if you stretched your hand and at moments feel their breath on your face.

For this kind of show, performers, in the past, had to undergo long and arduous training which started in childhood. The sense of security enjoyed by actors in regular stage pieces, where plot and dialogue are eternally fixed and every movement and gesture, every pitch and inflection of the voice are decided by a meticulously detailed directorial design and carefully rehearsed beforehand, is a luxury those old,

wandering performers never knew. The choice of actors here, even in the minor parts, was, therefore, of crucial importance. In this type of performance, they are the ones who ultimately decide if it will sink or float. They had to be inventive, resourceful, quick-witted, with a talent for improvisation at a moment's notice and enough versatility to slip in and out of as many as more than a dozen parts in the space of an hour and a half. In other words, they had to be real dodgers, with plenty of presence and the capacity to engage the audience into active participation.

The trio of *khalabees* who led and orchestrated the show had all of this and brought to the show an extra bonus; their vitality and joie de vivre were overpowering and seemed to spread through the tent like a dazzling, roaring flame. They flitted around, infecting every body with their irrepressible energy, mingling with the singers, musicians and audience in a breath-taking kaleidoscope of images, colours and sounds, hopping blithely across vast temporal spaces without ever losing sight of the present, its sorrows and impending disasters, but all the time sharpening our appetite for life, joy and laughter and, above all, giving us hope and solace.

# Tarek El-Deweri :

## A Play for Today*

On 10 January, 1610, Galileo Galilei, in his humble study in Padua, wrapped in a heavy overcoat, announces triumphantly : "Today mankind can write in its diary : Got rid of Heavens". Trembling with fear, his friend Sagredo, who had spent the night with him, being shown celestial phenomena that irrefutably confirmed the Copernican system, exclaims : "Where is God in your cosmography ?" To which Galileo responds, echoing the words of Giordano Bruno, another astronomer who ten years earlier had been burnt at the stake for propagating the same ideas which had become "subject to the express anathema of the church" : "Within ourselves or nowhere". A scene later, in this riveting dramatisation of the crucial years of Galileo's life, Brecht follows the great Italian scientist to Florence where he has become court mathematician to the Grand Duke Cosimo de Medici — a boy of nine.

Desperate for time to dedicate to his research, he had sought the job, not heeding Sagredo's warning that it was a court "run by monks". In a stormy confrontation with a trio of university gentlemen — a theologian, a mathematician and a philosopher — who have accompanied the duke to his house to "test his newly-discovered so-called Medicean stars" and who, feeling their authority threatened, refuse to even look through the telescope, brandishing the authority of "the sacred Aristotle" in his face, he simply declares : "Truth is born of the times, not of authority".

* 27 December 2001.

Things come to a head on 5 March, 1616, when "the Inquisition puts Copernicus's teachings on the Index", as the caption prefacing scene seven says. In this masterful centre-scene, an ingenious piece of dramatic writing, the ugly face of authority slowly reveals itself under a mask of urbanity and against a background of a ball at Cardinal Bellarmin's house in Rome. Flush with victory after Father Christopher Calvius, the chief astronomer at the Papal College, has confirmed his observations, Galileo walks into the party and is greeted with applause. The host, together with the suave Cardinal Barberini, subsequently Pope Urban VIII, engage him in a kind of affable bantering. But underneath the smooth, genial surface, one detects a mounting tension, an undercurrent sense of threat, of terrible danger. The presence of two clerical secretaries eavesdropping on the conversation and taking down notes makes the seemingly smooth, friendly encounter all the more spine-chilling. At the end, Barberini comes out into the open, but without giving up his playful manner : "He is a terrible man", he exclaims, laughing. "He cheerfully sets out to convict God of the most elementary errors in astronomy. I suppose God hadn't got far enough in his studies before he wrote the Bible; is that it ? My dear fellow ..."

This sinister combination of threatening and cajoling ends with Cardinal Bellarmin warning Galileo that the Holy Office has declared Copernicus's theory of a heliocentric universe "foolish, absurd, heretical and contrary to our faith" and, therefore, should be abandoned, and with the more sophisticated, worldly-wise Barberini advising him to find himself a mask; for "poor Galileo hasn't got one." Galileo should have come disguised as a good orthodox thinker, he laments. "It is my own mask that permits me certain freedom today," he

tells him confidentially. "Dressed like this, I might be heard to murmur : If God didn't exist, we should have to invent him".

From then on, the conflict is no longer one of Galileo against the formidable authority and might of the Roman Catholic Church at a certain point in history, or even of science versus religion — for this can somehow be conceivably resolved, as has happened sometimes; it is rather one of reason against the tyranny of tradition and inherited texts, of freedom of thought against political oppression and the constraints of any authoritarian system. This is what invests the play with so much power and makes it so relevant to our progressively dogmatic and repressive times. It also explains its tremendous impact on Egyptian audiences. Night after night, they fill the auditorium of Al-Hanager and sit in the dark, in silence, listening to Brecht's explosive dialogue, watching the magnificent Sami Abdel-Halim, as Galileo, defying the most awesome of taboos and all the time experiencing a rare and thrilling sense of liberation.

Nothing like this, nothing half as audacious has ever been uttered on the Egyptian stage. No wonder the play has had to wait for nearly half a century for its Egyptian premiere, and this despite the craze for Brecht in the 1960's and his abiding popularity and widespread influence since. The fact that Galileo is forced by the prospect of horrible torture to recant his views, abjure his teachings, cursing them as "errors"' and "heresies", does not diminish the electric excitement of that giddy, terrifying glimpse of freedom; if anything, it accentuates it. A triumphant Galileo would not make any sense to an Egyptian, would seem utterly divorced from reality — a facile fabrication of wishful thinking. His tragic descent from bright optimism to disillusion, from

proud defiance to servility and humiliation, and from honourable courage to cowardly betrayal is an experience too familiar to many Egyptians not to touch a raw nerve somewhere. Even his "new ethics", as he sarcastically refers to them, are not completely alien to the Egyptian ethical lore of survival, born out of centuries upon centuries of foreign oppression and autocratic rule.

As his student, Andrea, sums it up in scene 14 (which the current production sadly, but, given the style and overall directorial vision, understandably omits), it boils down to this : "When there are obstacles, the shortest line between two points may be a crooked one". No Egyptian can fail to sympathise, at least partially, and however reluctantly, with Andrea's justification of his master's public capitulation. "You were hiding the truth," he says, "From the enemy ... Like the man in the street we said 'He'll die, but he'll never recent.' You came back : 'I have recanted, but I'm going to live.' — 'Your hands are stained', we said. You're saying : 'Better than empty'. ... You sold another man's telescope to the Venetian Senate. And I saw you put that instrument to immortal use. Your friends shook their heads when you bowed to that boy in Florence : science gained an audience. Even then you used to laugh at heroes. 'People who suffer are boring', you said. 'Misfortune comes from miscalculation'. ... So in '33 when you chose to recant a popular point in your doctrine I ought to have known that you were simply backing out of a hopeless political wrangle in order to get on with the real business of science ... You gained the leisure to write a scientific work which could be written by nobody else. If you had ended up at the stake in a halo of flames the other side would have won."

To many Egyptians, particularly intellectuals and their disciples, such an argument would sound too disturbingly familiar. But though they would feel grateful if anybody trotted it out in their defence, most would be inclined to confess, with old, broken Galileo, that "they (the enemy) did win", and that their defection and betrayal were not wisely planned, but simply prompted by fear of physical pain. Fearing bodily torture and death by burning, or any other equally savage means (think of hungry hounds mauling at you) is only human; but it is not the stuff heroes are made of. And in our thoroughly unheroic age, Galileo comes across to us as an old friend, a co-sharer of our sorrows and lost dreams of heroism. It is often said that Brecht wrote something of his own plight in Galileo's situation. Of our plight too ?

To smuggle Galileo's last work, *The Discorsi*, written in secret under house arrest, out of Italy, Andrea needed great devotion, reckless courage, resourcefulness and considerable imagination. The ardour of a young, passionate scientist was needed too. Tarek El-Deweri, in his debut as director, happily displays the same qualities. In his production of this difficult, risky, long and willfully neglected play — a project that cost him over two years — he seems to have been guided by Galileo's words to the two papal spies, at the chessboard, in Bellarmin's house during the ball. The old-style chess was cramped, he told them. "Nowadays the play is to let the chief pieces roam across the whole board ... That way, you have enough space and can plan ahead ... If you live grandly enough, you can afford to sweep the board. One has to move with the times gentlemen. Not just hugging the coasts; sooner or later one has to venture out".

And El-Deweri has truly ventured out in this audacious production, with all the ardent recklessness and dedication of a young, passionate and intensely involved artist. But there was also patience and meticulous calculations. Like Galileo with his telescope, El-Deweri spent more than two years poring over the text, sifting through many translations, constructing his own reading of the story, searching for the right actors within his limited budget, and consulting with a group of talented artists (set and costume designer Medhat Aziz, choreographer Walid Amar, sound and music designer Haytham El-Khamisi, and video-film-maker Akram Farid) in order to substitute long verbal stretches with visual and sound effects. The result of all those long nights of arduous work was a vibrant, fast-paced and poignant performance, realistic at the core enough to grip the hearts of the audience, but without being quite so closed in as in realistic plays, and expressionistic in its outer framework without diluting the emotional and intellectual crisis at the heart of the play. His use of the other auditorium as a back extension to the stage (Al-Hanager is designed as a traverse stage with an auditorium on either side, though it is rarely used in this capacity) was quite ingenious. Through the lighting and the video screen, it provided plenty of space, like the infinite spaces revealed by Galileo's telescope.

On the screen, side by side with the scenes of horror, the trial, torture and general devastation, the space-craft Galileo, launched in 1989, was seen orbiting the planet Jupiter in absolute heavenly serenity. As the characters receded into the background, they seemed to drop out into a void, a dark chasm of oblivion. This set off Galileo, in his quasi-realistic setting, in sharp contours, as a vivid, irrefutable, concrete reality. But the sight of him, his students, daughter and

housekeeper against that vast, dark void triggered a sharp sense of deep, mysterious sorrow and anxiety. Perched on the edge of eternity or nothingness they seemed. The terror and exhilaration of his image of the universe, its superficial security and stableness and real insignificance and hazardous contingency were made a tangible, searing reality on stage. Hovering on the edges of that seemingly vast, shadowy, ambiguous space, like a subliminal vision of Galileo's truth, or our vision of the haunting and teasingly elusive beautiful, good and just, was Miret Michel, in her white grown and graceful, ethereal wanderings. Instead of the last scene of the play, which shows Andrea outwitting the border guards and smuggling his professor's manuscript out of Italy — the positive note on which the play ends — we see Miret guiding the great scientist along a path paved with light into the dark distance, towards the screen where the craft named after him is seen circling Jupiter.

For a first venture in directing, Tarek El-Deweri's sense of rhythm and feeling for motion, tone and colour are truly amazing. Long conversational scenes were cut into what looked like film shots by his dexterous manipulation of movement and lighting. All his omissions were wisely calculated and compensated for. The ball scene at Ballarmin's house was transformed, in a concrete visual metaphor, into a surrealistic chess game, with a larger than life board and pieces. As the dancers barged in and out, the sinister conversation, highlighting the points of most dramatic interest, was punctuated by moving the chess pieces with the sound of gunshot.

But more amazing than anything else, was El-Deweri's orchestration of the actors. To persuade a master like Sami Abdel-

Halim, a Charles Laughton in the making, to work with a novice director for a petty stipend, was the first step. His presence is enough to ignite anyone around with a divine, thespian fire. But Sameh Fikri, as his pupil Andrea, was a wonderful match. With no love interest, the most significant relationship in the play is between teacher and student. And Fikri's slender figure, transparent, sensitive face, and infectious warmth made his scenes with Abdel-Halim among the most moving and memorable I have seen on the Egyptian stage. Watching him for the fourth time running screaming at Galileo, "Unhappy the land that has no heroes," and taking in his teacher's response : "No. Unhappy the land where heroes are needed," I found myself wondering how many students teachers like me have disappointed? Nor can one forget Mohamed Shuman as the Procurator of Padua University and later as one of the mulish professors in Florence. His style of acting was a compound of grotesquery, immaculate caricature depiction, shot through with flashes of menace and humour.

In the hands of Tarek what has seemed to many a harsh, dry, intellectual play, has proved a deeply moving experience of terrible beauty and intolerable pain. But making such a marvellous beginning is always an ordeal. Will the next show be as bold and daring? Will it have such pristine clarity, force and poignancy? We just have to wait and see. Meanwhile, one has to remember Hoda Wasfi, that brave manager of Al-Hanager. Without her at the head of that centre, I doubt Brecht's *Galileo* would have ever seen the light in this corner of the world.

# Manal Ibrahim :

## The Power of Silence*

For Manal Ibrahim, becoming a stage director was a long, unphill struggle. Like many artists of the fringe, she was not formally trained in theatre – a frivolous craft, her family argued, which did not guarantee a decent job. Coerced into joining the faculty of commerce at Cairo university, she spent her undergraduate years working actively in the university theatre, and by the time she got her B.Com. she knew much more about making theatre than business administration. With some friends and colleagues, she founded an independent theatre troupe, which she hopefully christened The Talisman, and put together a production of Athol Fugard's *A Place with the Pigs*.

It was to open during the third Free Theatre Festival in 1992. By that time, however, and very unluckily for Manal, the festival which started in 1990 as a democratic forum for independent artists fighting for a place under the sun, had been taken over, after an ugly power struggle, in a kind of coup d'etat, by a self-appointed organising committee (or board of directors, as they pompously called themselves), with pronounced authoritarian tendencies. They quickly compromised the venture, selling out to the government, and turning the festival into a stuffy, semi-official event. Disenchanted with the movement, the best and most serious troupes left and those who remained found themselves having to put up with a harsher and more rigid kind of censorship than one could find at the most conservative

* 11 October 2001.

state theatre company. In their zeal to curry favour with the authorities and prove themselves worthy of being solely entrusted with the dispensation of the meager subsidies and performance spaces granted by the ministry of culture, the new organising clique instituted themselves as artistic, moral and political judges, scanning every performance for any dissident, seditious, or subversive elements and rejecting anything that smacked, however faintly, of opposition or rebellion.

As a new-comer to the festival, Manal knew nothing of this; she presented her work before the organisers, confident it would be accepted. But despite its artistic merit, as the members of the committee themselves conceded, *A Place with the Pigs* was declared politically objectionable. It was deemed too radically "anti-war", condemning it wholesale, without excepting the wars waged for just causes and, therefore, advocating pacifism. It was a terrible blow, all the more shattering because it came, not from the public censor's office, but from the least expected quarter, from within the ranks of the free theatre movement itself. The Talisman troupe did not survive it, not withstanding its name, and Manal found herself alone among the ruins of her dream. But she is a tough young woman (though you wouldn't guess it to look at her small, unimposing figure) and soon enough she started picking up the pieces and embarked on a new course.

She looked for an opening in the professional theatre and wisely decided that El-Tali'a (the Avant-garde) theatre – at the time, the most liberal and adventurous state company, with mostly young directors – was the best place to try. Without a degree from the Theatre Institute and no previous professional experience, she couldn't hope to get a

license from the Acting Professions Union to join the technical or artistic team of any professional company as a regular, full-time member. So she offered her services to El-Tali'a as a freelance, independent artist any time they wanted, in whatever capacity they could use her and for as little money as they were willing to pay. It was an irresistible offer for a theatre with a very small budget and chronically short of technical staff. Within a very short time, she had made herself indispensable and some directors wondered how they had ever managed without her. As assistant or executive director, she always ended up doing the jobs of props-master, stage-manager, public-relations officer, publicity agent, secretary, clerk, wardrobe mistress, set and lighting adviser, as well as errand-boy, psychotherapist, confidant and peace-maker. She knew she was grossly exploited, of course, but she loved every minute of it and never grumbled; she was buying experience and knew it never came cheap. No wonder she was soon nicknamed (fondly rather than disparagingly) 'Manal-Do-All' in the avant-garde and fringe theatre circles.

For the next nine years, Miss Do-All devoted herself completely to the theatre, making it her home, refusing to marry and have a family, unstintingly pouring her talent, youth and energy into works that did not bear her name and in whose credits she was sometimes forgotten. I saw her often, indeed, almost every time I walked into a theatre; for despite her many duties, Manal is an avid theatre-goer and rarely misses a show. I longed to ask her if her training, her hatching period, had not gone on a bit too long, if she had not tired of playing second fiddle, but I never had the chance. She seemed always in a rush, hurrying somewhere, would give me a small, friendly nod, a little half smile and disappear before I even had time to nod back. Finally, however, I got

my answer. A few months ago, Manal decided that, at last, her apprenticeship was completed and embarked on her first venture as director.

Curiously, she chose to make her debut, not at El-Tali'a, or any of the other companies she worked with, as one would have expected, but at Al-Hanager Arts Centre, away from the professional state-theatre altogether. This puzzled me at first; was she too modest, afraid, perhaps, to present her first work to a professional company? Did the state theatre people think her presumptuous, getting too big for her boots and turned their back on her? Was it possible she had not yet got a license after all those years? Was she trying, consciously or otherwise, to get even with the people (long gone off the scene now) who once banned her troupe from performing on that same stage, at Al-Hanager, during the third Free Theatre Festival and fulfill an old, thwarted dream? Was she hoping to exorcise the painful ghost of the disbanded Talisman troupe by reenacting their long frustrated wish? The answer, however, was much simpler than that. Al-Hanager happens to be the least bureaucracy-ridden theatre in Egypt; its director and staff are broadminded, enlightened people, anxious to help and not afraid to take risks; in terms of technical equipment, it is far superiour to many a professional theatrical venue; its clientele is predominantly young, exuberant and open to new experiments, and its cheerful, friendly, informal atmosphere bolsters the actors' morale and generates a warm sense of camaraderie between artists and audience.

For a script, Manal opted for August Strindberg's *The Stronger*, a play that had long fascinated her. Written in December 1888-January 1889 on the model of the short, serious sketch, called *quart d'heure*,

which had just come into vogue in Paris at the Theatre-Libre, and requiring only two actresses (the waitress who pops in for a second to place a cup of chocolate on the table is quite redundant), it was probably intended to supplement the repertoire of the ill-fated, almost still-born, touring experimental company Strindberg founded with his wife and leading lady, Siri von Essen, in March 1889. Like other plays of that phase in his career, it presents, in a realistic setting, a powerful, highly concentrated dramatic action in which two people are bound in an intense love-hate relationship and locked in deadly conflict. The two characters here, Mrs. X and Miss Y, or Amelia, both actresses, are at once friends and sexual and professional rivals.

But the really intriguing feature of this amazing skit is the absence of dialogue in the usual sense. The play unfolds like a dramatic monologue delivered by Mrs. X at Miss Y who keeps completely silent throughout, except for one loud laugh. As she speaks, Mrs. X gradually discovers things she had never realized, not even noticed before, and, at the same time, reveals her painfully divided feelings about Miss Y. She admires and envies her with such a burning, suicidal passion that she longs to annihilate her and take over her identity, destroying her own in the process. At the same time, she viciously gloats over Miss Y's misfortunes, taunts her with her professional and personal failures – the losing of cherished parts and lovers, including her own (Mrs. X's) husband – and revels in her own success and secure marital status.

As one reads the play, the question implicit in the title keeps popping up and at the end remains a teaser. Is Mrs. X the stronger

because she has the power of speech? Or does this power itself betray her into baring herself, making her, in fact, more vulnerable? And what about Miss Y's eerie silence? What does it conceal? What does it reveal? None of these questions can be answered in the study; only in performance can they be resolved, and even then, only temporarily. In other words, the answers can change with every new production, depending on what the director and performers make of the text, how they project it on stage, and what the audience read in it. Even Strindberg himself could not be sure which of the two characters was the stronger on the strength of the written text alone before it was performed. He cast his wife as Mrs. X, which suggests he thought of her as the leading character and, therefore, the stronger. To a Danish newspaper, however, he said that the heroine of the play did not utter a single word.

But amusing as this conundrum may be for the reader, it can prove a nightmare for a director. Facing it in her first production, Manal Ibrahim knew she had to choose an answer and stick to it. She opted for the silent woman being the stronger of the two, and exactly because of all the faults and failings the talkative one taunts her with – her untraditional way of life, her proud detachment, her dignified unhappiness and silent pain and her refusal "to learn from others, to bend and adapt". But such qualities were so subtle, so elusive and could be easily missed by the audience however competent the actress, Manal feared. They needed to be bodied forth, made concrete; but how? The answer came to her in the form of a Russian play she chanced to read at the time; it was Aleksander Pushkin's 1831 poetic "little tragedy", as he called it, *Salieri and Mozart*. She at once realized the emotional and thematic link between the two plays, reading in the

turbulent, murderous feelings of the older composer towards the younger one, as portrayed by the Russian poet, an exciting parallel/ variation on the relationship of the two actresses depicted by the Swedish playwright.

The problem was solved, she thought; she would superimpose the two plays on each other to foreground and heighten the artistic rivalry theme in *The Stronger*, would put Salieri, with his piano and monologues on stage, side by side with talkative Mrs. X, as her male counterpart; they would complement and illuminate each other. Miss Y would remain silent, but would incorporate the absent figure of Mozart who would speak for both of them through his music which should fill the theatre throughout. (Better get an expert to do the soundtrack, she thought. Ashraf Suwelam of course, who better?) The set would be neutral, neither Salieri's study nor a ladies' café, but the actors' meeting and rest room at some theatre. Salieri's costume would be 18th Century, indoor clothes and he would speak in classical Arabic to distance him in time, suggest he is a ghost from the past, while Mrs. X would be using the modern vernacular and wearing contemporary clothes. This should universalize the passions they embody, suggest they are not limited to a certain age or sex. Miss Y could wear a simple skirt and blouse; it is her face that matters. Her movement and Mozart's music would do the rest. This is how I imagine Manal thought as she put down Pushkin's play and started working on her adaptation with dramaturge Yehya Fikry; my scenario, however, though fictional, is faithfully based on what I saw in the production.

The script born out of the Pushkin-Strindberg merger was called *Too Late*, a name as mystifying as *The Stronger*. Too late for what? For

the good to be saved? For the bad to repent? But I won't dwell on this; I am tired of solving riddles. The text was there anyway and the real problem that faced Manal was not giving it a title but to find actors who could take on its three very demanding roles. Fortunately for her, Ashraf Farouk, Entesar and Ayah Soliman, all young, quite talented, well-trained and reasonably disciplined, were at hand. They gave impressive, finely-tuned, well-coordinated performances which moved and delighted the audience and gave Manal credit as director. Ayah Soliman, however, as the silent Miss Y and the visible, female counterpart of the absent Mozart, stood out among the rest. Her very slender, graceful figure, small, finely chiseled face and huge black eyes made her look quite ethereal, as if she was about to melt into the music she danced to and float away. As I embraced Manal after the show I was so happy she had finally made it as director, and happier that she made it where she first knew the bitter taste of injustice and frustration.

# Caroline Khalil :

## Devilish Delight*

AUC productions are notoriously tame. Private or public, they tend to play it safe and steer a timid middle course in the realms of sex and politics. In the former, they would not venture beyond Tennessee Williams and in the latter, Brecht would be the limit.

The situation, however, looks like changing. A new spirit is sweeping over the campus and, would you believe it, it is genuinely and boldly feminist! A few months ago I went to see Dana Sajdi's graduation project, a compilation of scenes from Shakespeare, Strindberg and Euripides, featuring Lady Macbeth, Miss Julia and Medea. I was struck then by the uninhibited passion and physical abandon of Sajdi's performance. It was blissfully free of the self-conscious restraint and embarrassing coyness which usually bedevil the rendering of such parts (or any parts that foreground female sexuality) by Egyptian actresses. What was more striking still, and quite exhilarating in its open defiance of established taboos, was the backdrop which sported a large wine-red orchid, cheekily suggesting a female sexual organ. The impact was almost electric.

I was glad to see Sajdi once more last week, but this time in a completely different role. She was a sour bitch in Caroline Khalil's production of Caryl Churchill's *Vinegar Tom* — acrid, vengeful, sanctimonious and sex-starved. Almost single-handedly, she brings three innocent women to the gallows, accused of witchcraft, delivers a

* 13 February 1992.

hasty, sycophantic prayer to the Lord, then rushes out ghoulishly to feast her eyes on the dangling bodies. Later, one presumes, though neither Caryl nor Caroline show it, she would go back to her safe and cosy dairy to lap up the cream.

Looking at *petite* Caroline, with her dainty face and saucer-like eyes, I could not believe she could hold so much passion or such radical ideas. Beautiful, privileged and talented (with a major role in Subhi's hit *In Plain Arabic*, playing the English student), and at sweet 21, what could she know of women's suffering at the bottom-end of the social ladder, in middle age, or of deprivation and social and sexual stereotyping?! The folktale atmosphere, village setting, familiar nursery rhymes and incantations, and the old-world charm of Churchill's text do not hide, but rather accentuate, the horror underneath. The moral identity of a woman and her existential truth are revealed as a hazy, controversial business, deeply embroiled in her social status, marital subservience, economic proficiency and her compliance with the inherited norms.

Alice, a rebellious, Lorca-type country girl, saddled with a child by an unknown father and an alcoholic, good-for-nothing mother, but still hankering after sex, falls in love with a mysterious gentleman in black who hits the hay with her in a field. She goes to the cunning-woman, a herbal expert and healer (what we would call now a female doctor) for comfort and a love-charm.

To the healer's thatch also comes Betty, the estate owner's daughter, a fugitive who is regularly imprisoned, bled and treated as mad because she refuses to succumb to the courting of an eligible, socially approved suitor. There is also Susan, a bedraggled, emaciated,

down-trodden and obsequious country wife, with three miscarriages, two children, and pregnant again; at the end of her tether and failing to cope, she comes seeking an abortion. Her deeply ingrained religious sentiments, however, give her no peace and drive her to the brink of mental collapse. Out of guilt, she confesses, in a suicidal drive, to practising witchcraft and her zealous atonement implicates her friend Alice, landing her in the hangman's noose.

As Susan, Mayar Ramadan looked suitably fragile and thin and Caroline dressed her fittingly in pale cream and grey. She was deeply moving as she kept fumbling with her grey smock, twisting and kneading its edges nervously. Betty, too, played by Dalia El-Abd, was befittingly costumed. She swam in a pale greyish-blue dress, three sizes too big at least and looked like a dazed and lost child. Faced with the hangman, she makes peace with society at last and leaves us with the painful image of a woman withering and slowly decomposing under the patronage of a wealthy husband – a hollow woman, very much like Eliot's hollow men.

Alice, however, was a tough nut to crack, and so was her mother. Sherine El-Ansari, as Alice, and Sherine El-Semari, as her mother Joan, formed a wonderful duo – radical, revolutionary, unpretentious and, in every move and gesture, thoroughly moving and deeply human. Bleary-eyed, with an unsteady, swinging gait, tousled hair and unkempt, scrappy, colourless clothes, not to mention her slurred enunciation, El-Semari gave an eloquent, convincing, and at times breath-takingly shrewd rendering of a sensitive middle-aged woman, fallen on sad times, and vulgarised by want, alcohol and years of conjugal battering.

El-Ansari, dressed in a skin-tight, low-cut black blouse and a long, copper-tan ragged skirt, seemed as if she had sprung fresh out of Lorca's Granada. She wore a savage, feral look and paced the stage like a caged she-leopard. Her words came out in sudden bursts as if torn out of her guts and her black eyes simmered with a burning rage. Her final, virulent spout of cursing rendered her strangely pathetic and her last words, "there is no way for us except by the devil", seemed to transfigure her from a common country girl to the saintly Maid of Orleans.

Caryl Churchill obviously had Jeanne d'Arc in mind and the whole play could be regarded as a slanted, saucy, ironical variation on the theme, charged with a suitable dose of hysteria, reminiscent of Arthur Miller's *Crucible*. Alice's blasphemous declaration at the end, her mother's fabricated confession of unholy practices, hurled defiantly with curses in the face of the witch-hunter, the herbal healer's dignified surrender (impressively played by Maysa El-Rifaie, in the spirit of an inscrutable Delphic oracle), and even Susan's humiliating embracing of guilt – all are bitter variations on the theme of martyrdom, exposing its obverse, feminist side.

Intelligently, Caroline Khalil captured the mood and message of the play and opted rightly for half-tones. The earthy, muted colours of the costumes (craftily manipulated to create many a telling irony, like dressing the really wicked woman in ethereal blue and white and her unmanly husband in off-blue and dusty brown) together with the austerely bare, straw-strewn set and clean, frugal lighting were a visual treat. The music too, strummed on a live guitar, with the help of an amplifier, partook of the general constrained dignity of the show.

The male parts, naturally, in view of the feminist orientation of the play, had to come last. The production, however, could not have materialised the way it did without the contribution of Tamer Amin as the farmer, of Nezar El-Shardawi as the lover, or without Yasser Amr's stage design, or Samir Hoftah's lighting-plan.

With so much depressing news coming from Algeria and with the relentlessly ominous threat of the veil, how wonderful it was to watch the debut of a young female director, and a good one at that !

## New Shoots*

# Tamer Mahdi and Others

Tamer Mahdi is only 25 and making his debut as writer and director in the professional theatre; but you would never guess it to look at him. His large frame and imposing stature, which makes him tower above you, together with an air of boundless self-assurance, cool elegance and sophisticated nonchalance give the impression of a seasoned artist of a much maturer age. Strolling round the foyer of the small Salah Abdel-Sabour hall of El-Tali'a theatre, where his first venture into the state theatre, *Who is the Movie's Hero?*, is currently on, greeting friends and talking to critics, his placid features and clear brow betray none of the usual symptoms typical of young artists in a similar situation -- no sign of strain, no trace of agitation, worry or nervous tension. On the contrary, he seems to generate an infectious sense of well-being and unruffled serenity. But appearances are often deceptive, and in Mahdi's case, the impression of inner tranquility he gives off clashes violently with the vision of the world projected in his plays.

His first attempt at drama, *We Were In a Jug ... (Kunna fi Garrah* – a phrase which makes the first part of a popular proverb that continues : "and now we're '*barra*', i.e., out"), was written while he was still an undergraduate at the AUC, studying mechanical engineering ("to secure a living which writing doesn't", as he cynically told me). To his surprise, it won him the 1998 Mohamed Salmawy award for the best text in Arabic by a student at the AUC annual Famous-for-15 Minutes

* 10 January 2001.

Drama Festival. Instead of the proverbial jug of the title (where mother rabbits are traditionally supposed to give birth), Mahdi set his 15-minute playlet inside the womb of a woman in labour and the action consisted of the desperate attempts of the twin fetuses, a male and female, to resist being 'delivered' by the invisible, alternately bullying and cajoling obstetrician outside. Finally, after a hilarious round of negotiations which pathetically fails, they are dragged out, literally screaming, into the world and the last impression is a poignant one of a paradise lost.

In his next play, *Two Birds and One Stone*, another 15-minute piece (presented at the same festival in 1999), the situation is reversed. Two young men thrust in a senseless war, at opposite ends, lose their way in the desert and run out of food and water. The prospect of imminent death brings them closer, hatching a new bond of friendship and solidarity which overrides their initial fear and suspicion of each other. Unlike the two fetuses in the earlier play, they long to be delivered and hang on to the rapidly fading hope of rescue. Ironically, however, when they glimpse a hazy figure approaching in the distance and fail to make out whether he is a rescue worker or a soldier from either of the two warring camps, they shoot him down with the one bullet they have left. Rather than risk one of them getting killed by the other's compatriots, they both decide to sacrifice their only chance of survival. The final scene in which they stand together, two lonely human figures clinging to each other and gazing in anguished bewilderment at the ruthless desert around them, is unbearably moving and burns itself into the memory.

A similar sense of absurdity and painful constraint imbues *A Writer Who Wrote Nothing* (also performed in Howard Hall at the AUC in 1999); but the feeling of claustrophobia is considerably lightened here by the funny escapades of the fictional characters who are intent on thwarting their author's intentions. Refusing to be bound by his plans for them, they keep jumping off the pages and materializing to argue with him and propose their own scenarios. Paradoxically, the failure of the writer to produce a complete, final text at the end does not come across as a negation of creativity, but rather as an exhilarating celebration of the infinite possibilities of theatre and the freedom and inventive powers of the artistic imagination.

In his current play, *Who is the Movie's Hero?*, Mahdi continues working in the tradition of the theatre of the absurd (his favourite writer is, predictably, Samuel Beckett), using grotesque humour and concrete theatrical metaphors to spin out his political and existential preoccupations. The play is set in a movie theatre which slowly reveals itself as a kind of prison (a la Sartre's *Huis Clos*) in which the actors and the audience alike are condemned to watch an eternal film of which they can make no head or tail. No one has seen the beginning of the movie and no one knows when it will end; more sinister still is the fact that none of those present can remember any world outside that darkened place with flickering lights and a leaking roof. Moreover, as soon as anybody begins to make sense of what they are watching, they rush out in terror as if chased by demons. But without understanding, no one can leave; and so, the majority are doomed to stay, feeling stupid and helpless. In their frantic efforts to discover the meaning of the film, they engage in endless squabbles, develop intense rivalries, divide into factions, conspire to dislodge the occupants of the expensive

seats and take their places and end up starting a war with paper pellets and rockets. Finally, one spectator shouts : "perhaps we are never meant to understand the film", to which another responds by venting his rage against the imaginary screen while the rest of the spectators, joining in his mood, start shooting their paper rockets at it. Mahdi never tells his audience openly what the inscrutable film is all about; he leaves each person to figure out its meaning for themselves. But whether they take it as a metaphor for the absurdity of the human condition or a scathing political satire on the dehumanizing effects of all oppressive forms of government, no one who sees this show can fail to acknowledge its ingenious theatricality and genuine sense of group-acting and audience involvement.

In directing this delightful 30-minute skit, Mahdi abolished the barriers between acting and audience spaces, seating his 30 actors, in ordinary clothes, without make-up, in rows of seats on one side, quite indistinguishable from the other rows occupying the other three sides of the hall. Only one metre separated the audience from the actors on all sides and the extreme closeness generated an intense sense of intimacy – an overwhelming illusion of actually sharing the same imaginary space with the actors. It was not surprising that on the two occasions I was there, the paper rockets which fell to the floor were picked up by the young people in the audience and sent whizzing across the hall in a spirit of glowing defiance amidst uproarious laughter.

Another two newcomers to the state theatre are Murad Abdalla and Dina Sa'id. Both star in Sa'id Soliman's *Mr. Zarzour* (Al-Salam theatre) – a musical adaptation of Yusef Idris's 1960s ground-breaking play, *Al-Farafeer* (*Underlings*), in which the master-servant eternal

conflict is translated into a competition between the arts of the East and West. Though heavily derivative – almost a pale copy of Intisar Abdel-Fattah's memorable 1986 *Darabukka*, minus Intisar's stunning musical inventiveness and inspired manipulation of ancient and popular ritual – *Mr. Zarzour* has provided Murad Abdallah with the necessary space to display his versatility as actor, dancer, clown and musician. Born into the National Egyptian Circus, to one of its founding masters, he seems to have imbibed from early childhood all the basic arts of performance, together with the skill of holding an audience spellbound. His studies of French literature at Cairo University has given him polish and sophistication, but without eroding that feel of warm earthiness, dangerous audacity and bawdy defiance typical of the authentic circus clown. To watch him fencing with the graceful, elegant Dina, a student of Greek and Latin at the same university, was such a joyful treat, such a heart-warming experience, it swept me along, making me forget all the drawbacks of the show.

Of the new crop of young talents I have spotted lately, I cannot fail to mention director Amr Qabeel who, with his independent Hamsa (Whisper) theatre group managed to scoop the award for best performance in Arabic of a Moliere play in the recent Moliere Festival held by the French Cultural Centre in Cairo with their production of *Le Malade Imaginaire*. Performed like a cartoon strip, with interludes by two clowns and plenty of topical allusions performed in the style of burlesque which brought Moliere closer to us that we could have possibly thought, that production was the real debut of that young and brave new independent group and held a lot of promise for the future. With so much youthful theatrical effervescence, it would be a sin to feel gloomy.

# Postscript I :

## The Play that Killed Mansour Mohamed.

### The Name of the Game*

With two Cairo International Experimental Theatre Festivals behind us, each providing ten days of intense exposure to the latest trends and fads in the Western performing arts, our young Egyptian directors are finally showing grave signs of infection. The experimental fever has taken the shape of a fast-spreading rebellion against the long standing tyranny of the word.

Increasingly, young directors, their courage boosted by the audacity of their Western counterparts, are challenging the primacy of the written text in the theatre and adopting a Hamletian pose of disdain for "words". We had just got used to texts being adapted, mauled and severely cut when German choreographer Maria Lerschenberg– Tony brought over her fascinating silent production of Sartre's *Huis Clos* last year, and lo and behold, suddenly a cry went up : Macbeth shall "speak" no more ! The body has become the new gospel; Peter Brook and Grotowski, the new prophets. In conversation their names are constantly dropped like bombs to crush the opponent – in this case the playwright and the conservative critic.

In a tradition that is primarily rhetorical and literary, centring on the sacred authority of the word; in a culture that has long discouraged (at times banning) all forms of artistic representation, and where the body is taboo (especially in the case of women), to attempt to banish verbal

* 6 June 1991.

language from the stage and rely solely on body language is tantamount to sacrilege. It was, perhaps, a dim awareness of the ideological implications of this imported theatrical form and its disruptive drive that has caused the stir and heated controversy surrounding Mohamed Mansour's production *The Game*.

The show consists of a sequence of sketches relying purely on mime and dance. A thin political narrative thread is provided to organise them into three units which, though of unequal length and power, curiously correspond to the classical dramatic formula of situation, complication and dénouement, or beginning, middle and end. This, perhaps, explains the occasional feeling that one was watching a traditional play, albeit without words. But narrative coherence apart, the show has managed to attain, through an intricate pattern of movement, a degree of the parodic intent and fragmentary style, symptomatic of post-modernist theatre.

Mansour has adopted a deconstructive technique, breaking down every gesture into its most basic components which are rendered jerkily, in a series of still frames, as it were, moving at different speeds. This principle of fragmentation which governs the show as a whole is carried over into the composition of each scene : portions of the total, still configuation are individually picked out as if by a camera; and while they spring into action, the rest remain frozen; when the "camera" (spotlight) has done the rounds, they start to connect and interact gradually until the whole comes alive. This technique which requires accurate synchronization and split-second timing was executed by the performers with admirable precision to the accompaniment of a crazy medley of pop and classical, western and oriental music.

The first unit consists of a series of funny sketches depicting negative aspects of Egyptian life. It winds up with a grotesque sequence about the sinister and destructive role of television in Third World countries. The whole stage becomes one huge TV set with one lonely, bored viewer flipping over the channels outside the proscenium arch. A syncopated American gangster film is succeeded by a hilarious oriental dance, farcical and inane cultural talk-shows, and two "blood and thunder" scenes from a typically melodramatic Egyptian soap opera. The poor viewer is startled when the images begin to step out of the screen. As they invade his privacy, consume his food, chase him around, seduce and attack him and finally threaten to slice him up and pack him into frozen-meat bags, he is forced to fly, like *Alice through the Looking Glass*, into the fictional world behind the screen, becoming himself a fiction ! At this point, the sequence acquires the status of a scathingly ironical metaphor, all the more eloquent for the absense of words, and with them, reason and common sense.

The second unit reviews, in quick flashes, by means of portable screens, the long and chequered history of Egypt up to the military debacle of 1967. Then, suddenly, the stage is empty except for a few washing lines swaying gently in the wind displaying rags. A symbolic white dress is replaced first by a bawdy red feminine underslip and then by the Egyptian flag. A hatted foreigner then creeps in to steal it.

This announces the beginning of the last, and one might add, weakest sequence : the search for the lost flag. The flag, needless to say, is finally found, after a lot of torch-waving-about-in-the-dark and a series of uninspired sketches indicating industrious work as the solution. The end may be simplistically optimistic and rather facile, but the overall style of the show works against such a conclusion.

## Enter the Censor* :

With only two more days to go, censorship has suddenly cast its shadow upon the third International Experimental Theatre Festival. After a strongly-worded complaint from some unspecified official quarters, a decision was taken by the Ministry of Culture to ban a scene from the festival's opening performance, *The Game*, in subsequent productions. The offending item shows a counterfeit Ka'ba, later revealed as an enormous oil barrel, being mounted by a belly-dancer amid the frenzied rotations of swirling dervishes and fake pilgrims. The scene was not intended to make fun of Islam's holiest of symbols; its innocuous message simply was : that, rather than God, people are now worshipping Mammon. The visual impact of the scene, however, has proved too shocking for many, stirring up a veritable hornet's nest. Charges of profanity were hurled at the director in the daily press, packaged with a lot of virulent abuse and comparisons with the wirter of *Satanic Verses*. The storm has not yet abated.

For me, at least, this incident has soured the festival, especially as it is not singular in its short history. Two years ago, a similar furore erupted round the Norwegian production of *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. The issue that time was nudity and a scheduled repeat performance was banned. Then as now, the issue of the artist's freedom became the focus of a heated debate. The course the debate has taken so far does not augure well for the artist; at best, it may eventually die down, leaving the issue unresolved; at worst, it may yield further restrictions and a lot of fear, making experimentation in the theatre virtually impossible.

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* 12 September 1991.

# Postscript II :

## How Far Can You Go ?*

Most Egyptian performances, particularly experimental ones, have to tread a fine line between outspokenness and what might be considered outrageous. However much they inveigh against taboos, they try – in terms of language, movement and costumes – to stay within the outer boundaries of what is considered proper and acceptable. A sentence like "I'll do anything to quench the fire between my thighs" (in Khalid Galal's production of Garcia Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba*, rechristened *Galila's Daughters* and hosted at Beit Al-Harrawi, or the sight of a girl peering in fear into the area between her legs (in Intisar Abdul Fattah's *O, Supple Branch with a Golden Wreath*) are as far as any director can safely go without invoking the censor's wrath. This often results in a kind of 'acceptable' erotic titillation – acceptable because the object of desire is either almost always absent or safely abstracted into a symbolic presence. I wonder if this could be taken as a plausible explanation for the sudden proliferation of lonely and sexually frustrated female figures on the Egyptian stage. Eight of the ten Egyptian productions to be seen at CIFET this year are built around such figures.

In *Galila's Daughters*, the movement of the eight female characters revolves round a silent male figure, framed in an alcove in the wall of the courtyard behind a gauze curtain which endows him with an iconic

* 27 August 1998.

status. In Dina Amin's *Illusion Circle* (a triple bill of three short plays by Alfred Farag at Wikalat Al-Ghouri), one of the plays, *The End of the Road*, is a dramatic monologue delivered by a mad woman tied to a stake – a woman who had been physically abused and battered out of her wits by her husband and ended up killing him. Catherine Hayes's searing *Skirmishes*, at Yusef Idris hall in Al-Salam theatre (translated and sensitively directed by Hanaa Abdul Fattah and superbly acted by Magda El-Khateen, Lobna Mahmoud and Safaa El-Tookhi), presents three women in crisis, trying to cope and come to terms with loneliness, desertion, disillusionment, emotional deprivation, the ravages of time and death. The live music – piano, clarinet and corno – composed by Intisar Abdul Fattah, together with the fascinatingly vivid reproduction of a typical sick room in the set, make this production an unforgettable experience.

Music, dance and poetry is the material out of which both Intisar Abdul Fattah (in his *O, Supple Branch with a Golden Wreath*) and Maher Sabry (in his *The Harem*) weave their images of women's hopes, fears and frustrations. I have not yet seen a complete rehearsal of Sabry's work, but the poems he composed for it are very graphic and deeply stirring. Interestingly, the lead dancer in both shows is the same and she performs competently in both. This is not surprising since Sabry and Abdul Fattah explore the same artistic terrain.

Two more plays about women are *Aunt Safiyya and the Monastery* (a production of Al-Hanager Centre based on a novel by Bahaa Taher and directed by Naser Abdul Mon'im) and Sa'id Soliman's *Variations on a Folk Tale* (also adapted from a novel by Hassan Ahmad Hassan and produced by El-Tali'a). By a curious coincidence, both are set in

Upper Egypt and invest the characters with the same harsh ruggedness that characterizes this region. Both also feature formidable women who assimilate the values and teachings of patriarchal society and ferociously enforce and sustain them. Taher's novel is far superior to Hassan's *Variations*, but I am still waiting to see a run-through of *Aunt Safiyya* to find out what Sa'id Hajaj, who adapted it for the stage, has made of it.

# Postscript III :

## For Future Reference :

### Art and Politics*

In the Arab world where repressive authoritarianism, in varying degrees of severity and one form or another, penetrates all aspects of life and constitutes the ruling principle – informing the structures of thought, social relations and government – cultural events, and theatre festivals in particular, invariably have an air of crude political machination. Because theatre in the Arab world has always had an irreducible political dimension and continues to be inextricably bound up with a critique of domination, official theatre festivals are often viewed by governments as effective means to divert attention from the many arrant abuses of human rights in this part of the world, and project a spurious façade of democracy, freedom of speech and conscience.

The partisan political base of such events, however well camouflaged, is hardly a secret. Over the years, Arab artists, critics and cultural activists have had to learn how to manipulate it in their interests without compromising their visions. In this respect, bluffing has proved invaluable. By taking the establishment at its word, pretending to believe its glossy slogans, and threatening to embarrass it by calling its bluff if necessary, artists have been able, in some cases, to secure subsidies, spaces, media coverage and a bigger margin of freedom.

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* 29 April 1999.

Foreign participants face a different challenge, particularly if they belong to formerly colonialist nations. Burdened with a sense of guilt, and a heritage they feel they have to apologize and make up for, they find themselves in the position of having to suspend all judgement and excercise the virtue of tolerance and respect for difference to a fault. This makes them a deliciously easy prey to autocratic regimes whose internationally acknowledged legitimacy is mere pretence. Caught in the guilt trap, they are rendered largely passive. Unwilling to interfere with what they regard as hallowed "internal affairs", and burdened with an exaggerated and overrated respect for otherness and cultural specificity, they are forced into a position which is the reverse side of the superiority coin.

Instead of holding up their culture as the norm and only model as they once did, Westerners now go to the other, equally reprehensible extreme of uncritically accepting repressive aspects and human rights abuses of formerly colonized countries which are passed off as part of the cultural heritage. Admittedly, they are in an unenviable position; if they object, they will be branded as ethnocentric, interfering busybodies by both east and west. In any case, the same cultural sanctity plea will be trotted out to defend the indefensible against foreign interference or even observation.

"If people like it, who am I to judge" about sums up the foreign position. Never mind if what the 'people' (read the natives) like is media-imposed, enforced, and popularized. Never mind if the free souls in these doubly oppressed countries (first militarily and then culturally) do not go along with the agenda of the new internal form of oppression. What the intelligentsia of the West have not yet realized is

that many of the ruling establishments in previous colonies have decided to play on their sense of guilt to wangle a form of tacit validation for their new improved brand of oppression — all the more lethal because it comes from inside. One is asked, in the name of respect for 'otherness', to condone dominant discourses that are held like an axe over the necks of the people, discouraging independent thought and leading to a herd mentality, as well as repressive laws that restrict people's freedom of action and sometimes physically multilate them into the bargain.

At the last CIFET, I asked one of the honorees in a public meeting to show solidarity with Egyptian artists in opposing censorship; he looked pathetically flustered and stammered "this is an internal matter. I don't want to interfere". But even when they are not hampered by such considerations, foreign artists are often reluctant to air their views in public for fear of endangering the interests of their fellow Arab artists who find it necessary in many cases to pay lip-service to the regime's liberal nature and sustain the masquerade in order to be allowed to work. At the Amman Festival for Independent Theatre this month, a German theatre scout was deeply shocked and outraged by the sight of a policeman brutally kicking a frail old woman in the street. His first impulse was to complain in an open letter to the press. What finally restrained him was not knowing what kind of repercussions his action would provoke against the festival. "Mind you", he said, "there is a lot of police brutality in Germany; but when we find out about it we complain".

Nevertheless, compared to other Arab theatrical events, the Amman Festival for Independent Theatre has managed to create an open forum

for discussion and genuinely democratic dialogue between artists across national boundaries. Moreover, it has succeeded, over six consecutive years, in guarding its independent status, widening its audience base and network of friends and associates, and creating a real sense of partnership with its many private and public donors as well as the local authorities, particularly the municipality of Amman. The financial survival of the festival hangs on the ability of its workaholic founders, Al-Fawanees and Al-Warsha troupes, to project a community-based vision of theatre which can convince artists, sponsors and the public that they have a stake in cultivating an independent theatrical movement, and to articulate the needs and concerns of this movement in a way that enthuses the world of money and politics without entailing serious compromises. In this respect, the core function of the festival is not to present top-quality performances in theatres suited to the purpose, as is the case with most festivals, but rather to create encounters between artists of different nationalities and cultural backgrounds to exchange ideas and experiences and explore ways of collaborating on joint projects, making theatre away from governments and promoting intercultural understanding and creative freedom.

One such encounter was the two-day Second Arab-Euro Theatre Meeting hosted by the festival this year. Artists from Europe, Africa and the Arab world, including Iraqis and Palestinians living in Israel, as well as representatives of the Ford Foundation Arab Arts Project and members of the Informal European Theatre Meeting (IETM) met to discuss their needs and share their visions and dreams. And the remarkable thing was the absence of the factious spirit and the empty, overblown rhetoric which usually characterize such meetings. However enthusiastic the speakers got, the bottom line was always practical.

Summing up the meeting, Mary Ann DeVlieg, the secretary general of IETM, said : "the atmosphere of the gathering was one of a group of people reflecting together on what needs to be done. It seems we have reached the second big step (the first was last year's meeting, also during the festival) on a path which is going in a good direction".

Many practical matters were addressed : the need for an efficient information system; the crucial importance of creating spaces for artists to work in, create and perform, and the possibility to continue working for a long term without constant insecurity; the need for artistic and management training opportunities and structures which provide support for young theatre artists; the role of the European festival organizer who wants to invite Arab theatre companies and all the contradictions this involves; the pressures on the artists to be submerged in administration, and, of course, MONEY.

In this respect, the Tunisian model of getting state financial support without state control was particularly useful and I hope it will be adopted by other Arab ministries of culture. According to Izz Eddin Qanoon, founder and director of the Tunisian Théâtre Organique, the company sells a number of performances to the ministry of culture to cover the production costs and depends for the rest of its budget on the box-office, touring contracts and sundry donations. Other practical models and concrete proposals were given, including an arts management course to be launched in Cairo this June by the Arab Arts Project, a tri-lingual periodical publication (in Arabic, French and English) to provide background and up-to-date information about theatres in the Arab world, a communication network, based in Europe, to facilitate contacts between Arab and European theatre people and

promote a form of "pragmatic and productive solidarity" between them. On the issue of funding, serious questions were raised and debated, particularly the hidden agendas of some funding agencies and the criteria on which funding decisions are made. At the end of her report, DeVlieg emphatically states that "this second Arab-Euro Theatre meeting provided a rich if not definitive list of issues and questions within a positive framework of people who have the will and the experience to make the most of working together".

The reactions to this fruitful meeting, however, were not universally positive. On Sunday, April 11, the English-language *Jordan Times* reported : "The anti-normalization committee of Jordan's 13 professional associations on Saturday launched a boycott of the current Amman International Theatre Festival on the grounds that it is financed by foreign sources and foreign groups participate in it." Furthermore, the paper went on to say, "a statement issued on Saturday by the committee also asked the Amman Municipality 'to take the same stance on the issue, to keep in harmony with public opinion and hold local festivals that are purely patriotic'."

Foreign funding is often regarded with deep suspicion by xenophobic nationalist zealots all over the Arab world as a surreptitious form of cultural invasion and a threat to Arab cultural identity. But in Jordan, where the unions and professional associations are dominated by Islamists, the opposition takes a more extreme and virulent form and is bound up with the question of Arab-Israeli peace. Over the last year, according to the *Jordan Times*, the 'zealots' in the unions "have stepped up their campaign against seminars, conferences and other events organised in cooperation with foreign institutions, claiming they are part

of a 'Zionist infiltration' of Jordanian intelligentsia and cultural life." This attitute, which brands all foreigners as spies and subversive agents in the pay of Israel, and any Arab who deals with them, or even talks to them, as a traitor, is, to say the least, unreasonable and can only serve the interests of bigots, fanatics and cultural isolationists. Equally unreasonable is the siege imposed by many Arab cultural bodies on Palestinians living in Israel whose only crime is that they did not leave their land and have to carry an Israeli passport. The anti-normalization campaign against the festival was fuelled by the invitation to the festival of Al-Qasaba theatre, a group from East Jerusalem whose members, all Palestinians, have never received support from the Israeli ministry of culture or cooperated with it.

But however ugly and unjustified, this attack served to strengthen the credibility of the festival as a forum for genuine democratic dialogue. The organisers invited their opponents, supporters, and Arab Israeli guests to a press conference to openly debate the matter. It does not matter that many of the 'zealots' stuck to their guns till the end, turning a deaf ear to the Palestinians' anguished pleas for solidarity and support and their moving expression of the ordeal of being regarded as unwanted outsiders by both Israelis and Arabs. What matters is that the bomb was defused through democratic dialogue.

The festival continued as normal, proving every day, through its many workshops, foreign and Arab shows and collaborative events and activities, the value and validity of its agenda of open-minded cultural and human interaction. And as if to make it up to Al-Qasaba artists for the pain and humiliation they suffered at the ungracious hands of the 'zealots', the Jordanian public gave them a warm and rousing reception.

Their adaptation of George Shahadah's *The Emigrant from Brisbane* in which the setting was transposed to Palestine was a good specimen of the company's work. Proficient acting, efficient use of space, imaginative evocation of atmosphere and states of mind through movement and lighting, serious topics, a lavish use of humour and local colour, and a tendency to cut deeper than the conventional surface of things and provoke reactions other than laughter define its style and explain its wide popular appeal. The ordinary life of simple Palestinians is vividly portrayed without sentimentality or false heroics. Racked by suspicion and torn between greed and honour, the village men who are told that one of their women (who is not named) once had an illegitimate child by a man who after years abroad has died — leaving the child a fortune — are alternately repellently brutal, ridiculously befuddled and endearingly weak and pathetic.

Equally vigorous and emotionally robust was *Abu Arab Trapped in the Corner* – a one-man show, improvised and performed by Ali Abu Yassin of Al-Bayader Troupe in Palestine. In the style of a *hakawati*, or itinerant story-teller, Yassin gave us a strong and pungent taste of the reality of daily life in Gaza as experienced by a simple Palestinian worker trying to survive. The narrative is episodic, anecdotal, and interspersed with sardonic remarks, satirical comments, and topical jokes. Like all good *hakawatis*, Yassin has a strong presence, ready wit, a talent for mimickry and the ability to engage the audience actively in the show. This last trait reached a peak at the end when the actor walked up to the audience and said : "Look, I don't know how to end this play. We tried one version in which the worker decides not to cross into Israel to find work and we were bitterly criticized for not being realistic and accused of stigmatizing the thousands of Palestinians who

earn their living in Israel. So we changed it, and the worker went to Israel; but the intellectuals objected. 'Better starve than compromise', they said. Now, I leave it to you to end it the way you like." Given with such stark directness and urgency, the problem puts the audience, rather than Abu Arab, in a difficult corner.

Palestinian daily life featured once more in the Jerusalem-based Theatre Day Productions revival of Sa'dalla Wannus's *The Glass Cafe* but in a grotesque, metaphoric vein. The tomb-like cafe, with its ghostly visitors, demented clients, and eternal routine of backgammon, insect-hunting and coffee-drinking, ruthlessly exposes the apathy, cowardice, indifference, futility, and blind self-involvement of its inhabitants and ends with an apocalyptic prophecy of disaster. Palestine was also the theme of the Tunisian *Looking for Aida*, written and acted by Jalilah Bakkar and directed by Fadil Jua'ibi, with the accent this time on *al-Naqba* and the experience of the Palestinian diaspora. But despite the lyrical, elegiac mood (which moved some to tears), Bakkar's overpowering presence, touching sincerity, masterful control of tone and refined economy of expression, and notwithstanding Jua'ibi's sophisticated mise-en-scene and subtle use of lighting, many, including Palestinians, found this monodrama embarrassingly simplistic, uncomfortably sentimental, cliche-ridden and facilely romantic. A cathartic script which romanticizes Palestine out of existence is how I describe it.

Dictatorship, tyranny and oppression came second on the agenda of Arab shows, providing the theme of the rambling, bombastic and coarsely self-indulgent Jordanian *Dreams of Sheherazade*, the figuratively complex and passionately outspoken Iraqi *Hollow Men*,

and the Irbid Art Theatre Troupe's *The Tyrant and the Mirror*. Less directly, it informed the visually exuberant Tunisian *Love in Autumn* (where the conflict between two women over a man is resolved by giving the bone of contention AIDS); Alfred Farag's *The Last Walk* (competently performed by Vanya Exerjian) which centres on gender oppression; Jean Genet's *The Maids* performed by Kuwaiti drama students; the Iraqi *Sidra*, based on a Sumerian legend and directed by Fadil Khaleel in a solid classical style; a Belgian production of Slawomir Mrozek's *Out At Sea*, where power takes the form of cannibalism; and the Tanzanian *Death of A Coconut Tree*, by the Bagamoyo Players, in which the tyrant (an ugly capitalist) is punished with sterility.

To provide relief from the pressure of politics, there were a joint Swedish-Jordanian concert from the Backa Theatre Musicians and the Rumm Troupe; the stunning *We Can't Hold Our Breath Any Longer* by the ALIAS Dance Group from Switzerland; Kris Niklison's *M/F* from the Netherlands which won her the best actress award at the last CIFET; two delightful evenings of song, dance, and story-telling from the Egyptian Al-Warsha; the haunting Australian *The Descent* by The Chapel of Change group which was seen in Cairo at the last CIFET; and Enrico Labayen's *Puirt a Beul and Other Dances* programme from the USA. (Puirt a Buel, I am told, is the name of a type of Gaelic music.)

For further relief, there was a lot of partying and some excursions to the historic sites of Jordan, and I personally spent a delightful day in the open air at Daret al-Funoon (House of Arts) observing the Image and Movement Workshop given by the Bonheur troupe from the

Netherlands. Despite all the politics and heated wrangling, the festival managed to give Amman two weeks of vibrant cultural activity and a lot of food for thought. It also gave the city an appealingly dégagé air, like a party tent pitched for just one night.

# Appendix :

## Proposal for the "Now or Never" Free Theatre Festival 2000

### Now or Never

***This festival*** is an assertion of our existence as independent theatrical groups which have succeeded in working for ten years under exhausting conditions and despite crippling production restrictions that are threatening us with extinction.

This festival is a meeting-point for 10 independent theatre groups, with the eventual aim of :

* Expanding in future to encompass other independent theatrical entities;
* Establishing a continuing forum for the constructive exchange of ideas, visions and artistic experiences.

Ten years have passed since the First Free Theatre Festival was held in 1990. While that event, we believe, led to some recognition of our status, the rights we dreamt of and barely dared to demand then are now urgent necessities.

### Our Purposes :

The right to make independent theatre through the adoption of a new formula for theatrical production and performance — namely, the Non-Profit Professional Company.

## Who We Are :

On June 16, 1999, ten independent theatre groups came together. Most of these have proved themselves over the past decade; many took part in the first four Free Theatre Festivals (1990-1994) and achieved enough acknowledgment to allow them to cooperate with local and international cultural organizations. This was reflected in :

* its members' effective participation in the Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre.
* its members' representing Egypt in such international festivals as Avignon (France), Festival Mediterraneo (Italy), Free Theatre Encounter (Jordan), Carthage Festival (Tunisia), and Spring of Theatre (Morocco).
* the participation of its members in theatre workshops in Egypt and abroad.

## However :

After practicing theatre for several years, these groups have realized that :

* Loose and random collaborations do not provide the minimum requirements they need to grow and develop at a rate commensurate with the development of their artistic abilities.
* Nor will the current working conditions allow them to become professional (non-profit) theatre companies entitled to legal and financial status.

## What Are the Restrictions ?

* The scarcity of adequate performance spaces to accommodate the volume of theatrical activity in Egypt today. A small illustration of this is that the state theatre organization owns not more than 10 performance spaces in a capital city of 20 million inhabitants.
* The prohibitive cost of renting such performance spaces as are available.
* The existence of a bureaucracy that effectively prohibits independent groups from using state theatre spaces even when they are free.
* Restrictive laws that prohibit the use of non-traditional performance spaces.
* Organizations that are currently supposed to fund these groups do not have or implement a policy to sustain them or further their growth and development.

## Long-Term Goals :

1. Legal recognition of the rights of all companies :
   a) To use non-traditional spaces as performance spaces.
   b) To open a box-office.
   c) To receive funding from local and international institutions.
2. An office to fulfill production, organizational and fundraising needs for all independent companies year-round.
3. A permanent centre for independent groups, comprising performance and rehearsal (and office) spaces, run by the groups themselves.
4. A budget for independent companies, distributed by the office itself.

## The Organizing Groups :
### (in alphabetical order)

### Alternative Theatre Group :

This is without a doubt by far the oldest and most successful independent theatre group located outside Cairo. Its Alexandria-based director, Mahmoud Abou Doma, presents a solid repertory of translated Western and African texts, with the emphasis on acting.

### Atelier Theatre Group :

All graduates of the faculty of Fine Arts, the members of this group are highly proficient at creating a mood of overpowering energy and effective visuals. Audio-visual effect with simple props and vigorous acting is their hallmark. They present original scripts written by their members, and are most noteworthy for their simple and impressive sets.

### Caravan Theatre Group :

Egypt's first independent feminist theatre troupe, Caravan, under the direction of Effat Yehya, attempts to combine Western feminist texts with an analysis of women's issues in the Arab world today. This meeting of Eastern and Western cultures has resulted in a number of sophisticated performances.

### Light Theatre Group :

One of the oldest independent theatre groups, the Light group, under its director Tarek Said, adapts non-theatrical texts for the theatre. Their focus is on daily life and topical social issues and technically on

physical and vocal acting skills, and their shows always contain a high element of comedy and are highly entertaining and accessible.

### Maraia Theatre Group :

Meaning "mirrors" in Arabic, this company seeks to fragment and deconstruct the status quo in order to expose the taboos and prejudices, sexual and otherwise, which limit and restrict people's lives. Combining Arab tradition with postmodern insight, director Maher Sabry and his group use poetry, music, dance and the plastic arts to create satirical, emotionally charged and aesthetically eloquent images. Dance, mixed media, costume and lighting combine in their work to produce a strong visual impact.

### Modern Dance Troupe :

Dancer/choreographer Karim El-Tonsi's company is the first independent company in Egypt dedicated exclusively to modern dance. Formerly affiliated with the Cairo Opera Dance Theatre Company, El-Tonsi has presented several highly successful shows, and Modern Dance is today recognized as an exciting new company with a style all its own.

### Movement Theatre Group :

The Movement troupe is perhaps the only independent theatre group in Egypt that performs original scripts on a grand scale, orchestrating the movement of large groups of actors and singers. Its director, Khaled El-Sawy, is also an acting name in Egyptian cinema and television.

## Rebellion Theatre Group :

Hailed by American avant-garde director George Bartenieff as "the best young director he saw in Egypt", Rebellion's founder and director, Hany Ghanem, takes ideas from philosophy as a starting point for his revolutionary shows, where actors interact directly with audiences in non-traditional spaces. In inventive, elaborately constructed sets, often with a mixed- media element, they move together in childhood-inspired games and rituals.

## Shrapnel Theatre Group :

Starting in University theatre and soon finding a place in Al-Hanager, its creative team, Mohamed Abul Su'ood and Ihab Abdel-Latif, specialize in deconstructing classical texts and focusing on their relevance to life today. Abul Su'ood is recognized today as a director with a rich visual imagination.

## Temple Theatre Group :

American University graduate Ahmed El-Attar originally formed this group with the aim of actor training and public performance, but soon progressed to full-scale, multilingual plays based on Greek mythology. Multilingualism is a feature of The Temple's plays, which are performed in Arabic, English and French. They have lately expanded their work to include original trilingual scripts.

## Festival Programme :

### The Festival will include the following events :

**1. Performances of 10 plays by independent theatre companies :**

Ten plays by the participating companies will be performed; most of these will be revivals of previously successful plays.

**The participating companies' plays will be as follows :**

| Play | Company |
|---|---|
| 1) *Fire-Raisers* | Alternative |
| 2) *Marionette* | Atelier |
| 3) *Memory of Rhythm* | Caravan |
| 4) *Diamond Fragments* | Light |
| 5) *The Harem* | Maraia |
| 6) *Xtravaganza* | Modern Dance |
| 7) *Engagement Ring Auction* | Movement |
| 8) *Dreams of '99* | Rebellion |
| 9) *Ispahan* | Sharpnel |
| 10) *The Committee* | Temple |

**2. Performances of plays by Festival guests :**

The organizing companies will invite a limited number of independent troupes to perform. Among these will be :

* A performance by the Al-Warsha company.

* Tales from the Arabian Nights told by Cherine el-Ansari.
* An evening of storytelling presented by the Women and Memory Forum.
* *Vienna* adapted and directed by Sarah Enany and starring Caroline Khalil.
* A performance art piece by Ihab Abdel-Latif.
* Psychodrama Troupe's play *Finished Stories*.

**3. Video showings of plays by independent companies :**

A separate space will be set aside for the showing of video-tapes of independent theatrical troupes' past performances.

**4. Photography exhibition :**

Over the years, many shows have been beautifully photographed, and these pictures will be displayed in a standing exhibition throughout the Festival.

***5. Theatre Presentation Weekend !***

The first event of its kind in Egypt, *Theatre Presentation Weekend* is a day where potential funders and patrons of the arts can meet with artists presenting their projects in a relaxed, semi-formal atmosphere.

**6. Opening and Closing Ceremonies :**

These will be accessible, entertaining events that everyone can enjoy !

## Festival Requirements :

1. Suggested *performance spaces* :

   a) Al-Hanager Main Stage.

   b) Al-Hanager Gallery.

   c) The Small Hall, Cairo Opera House.

   d) The Open-Air Theatre, Cairo Opera House.

   e) The exterior of the Supreme Cultural Council Building.

   f) Space to erect a marquee in the car park of the Cairo Opera House.

2. *Rehearsal space* a month before the festival.

3. A room to serve as a *Festival office.*

4. A *budget* covering the costs of :

   a) reviving each performance for two nights.

   b) a video camera and operator to document the Festival.

   c) a photographer and photography expenses.

   d) the publication of a booklet documenting the history of the independent theatre movement in Arabic and English.

   e) the publication of a daily Festival bulletin.

   f) a press and public relations office.

   g) publicity, including a poster, invitations, pamphlets, photographs and photo stands.

   h) incidental expenses and emergencies.

# Proposed Budget
# for the "Now or Never"
# Free Theatre Festival 2000

| Item | Amount (in L.E.) | Sub-totals |
|---|---|---|
| **Rentals & Performance Costs :** | | |
| Rental of rehearsal space for 1 month | 3,000 | |
| Rental of marquee, chairs & requirements of open-air performance | 10,000 | |
| Rental of video projector, stand & screen | 2,000 | |
| **Costs for revival of 10 plays** | 85,000 | |
| Gratuities for technicians (for 10 plays) | 6,000 | |
| Compensation for volunteers (10 persons) | 5,000 | |
| **Rental & Performance Sub-Total** | | **111,000** |
| **Publicity :** | | |
| Poster (1000 copies) | 2,000 | |
| Flyer (2000 copies) | 600 | |
| Invitations (1000 invitations) | 500 | |
| Programmes (5000 programmes) | 2,500 | |
| Questionnaire (4,000 copies) | 250 | |
| T-shirts (200) | 1,600 | |
| Television & Newspaper advertising | 20,000 | |
| **Publicity sub-total** | | **27,450** |
| **Documentation & Public Relations:** | | |
| 1) **Daily Bulletin & Festival Booklet :** | | |
| Payment for daily bulletin writers and staff | 6,000 | |
| Printing costs of daily bulletin | 5,000 | |
| Costs of printing & preparing booklet | 5,000 | |
| **Bulletin & Booklet Sub-Total** | | **16,000** |
| 2) **Photography & Videotaping :** | | |
| Festival photographer | 2,000 | |
| Developing & printing pictures of previous productions (for 10 companies) | 3,000 | |

| Item | Amount (in L.E.) | Sub-totals |
|---|---|---|
| Videotaping (for 10 performances) | 10,000 | |
| **Photography & Videotaping Sub-Total** | | 15,000 |
| **3) Press Office & Photo Stand** | 1,000 | |
| **Documentation & PR Sub-Total** | | 32,000 |
| Presentation Weekend Costs | 2,000 | |
| **Total Festival Costs** | | 172,450 |
| 5% Incidentals & Emergencies | 8,622 | |
| **Grand Total (in L.E.)** | | 181,072 |

**Budget Summary**

| Item | Amount (in L.E.) | Sub-totals |
|---|---|---|
| Rentals & Performance Costs : | | |
| Rental Costs | 26,000 | |
| Costs for revival of 10 plays | 85,000 | |
| **Rental & Performance Sub-Total** | | **111,000** |
| Publicity : | | |
| **Publicity sub-total** | | **27,450** |
| **Documentation & Public Relations:** | | |
| 1) **Daily Bulletin & Festival Booklet :** | 16,000 | |
| 2) **Photography & Videotaping :** | 15,000 | |
| 3) **Press Office & Photo Stand** | 1,000 | |
| **Documentation & PR Sub-Total** | | **32,000** |
| Presentation Weekend Costs | | **2,000** |
| **Total Festival Costs** | | **172,450** |
| 5% Incidentals & Emergencies | | **8.622** |
| **Grand Total (in L.E.)** | | **181,072** |

**Cost Breakdown for "Now or Never" Productions :**

| Play | Company | Cost (in L.E.) |
|---|---|---|
| 1) *Fire-Raisers* | Alternative | 8,000 |
| 2) *Marionette* | Atelier | 10,000 |
| 3) *Memory of Rhythm* | Caravan | 8,000 |
| 4) *Diamond Fragments* | Light | 8,000 |
| 5) *The Harem* | Maraia | 9,000 |
| 6) *Xtravaganza* | Modern Dance | 10,000 |
| 7) *Engagement Ring Auction* | Movement | 5,000 |
| 8) *Dreams of '99* | Rebellion | 10,000 |
| 9) *Ispahan* | Sharpnel | 10,000 |
| 10) *The Committee* | Temple | 5,000 |
| **Total Costs** | | **83,000** |
| Incidentals & Emergencies | | 2,000 |
| **Grand Total** | | **85,000** |

رقم الإيداع : ٢٠٠٣/١١١٣٢
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مطابع الهيئة المصرية العامة للكتاب